

SERMON FOR FIRST DAY ROSH HASHANAH 5780

“Ugh! I hate it!” Filled with frustration, the woman turns from her work, glances up at the clock and sighs in despair. Only 10 minutes left. What a mess I’ve made of this, she thinks. Well, too late to fix it now. Her shoulders slump.

Across the room, the teacher notices the woman’s gesture of sad resignation and hurries over. “What’s the matter?” she asks the student.

“It didn’t turn out the way I planned! I don’t like this part [she gestures] or that section. And over here [she points] the colors got all muddy.”

“Get out your white gesso” says the teacher. “Just paint over those parts. Add another layer. Here, over here, what’s under that? [she asks as she scrapes off the muddied coat of paint and rips off a layer of paper.] “That’s nice. Keep that and build on it. What do you like about this piece? Add more bits of that. [Here. And how about here?] Just keep going. Look, you’re not done. Maybe you’re never done.”

The student listens intently, looking more hopeful. But then, she says, doubtfully, “I don’t know, maybe I should just throw this away and start over from scratch.”

Now, the teacher looks into the student’s eyes. “You can always start another piece,” she says, “but never, ever, throw an old piece away. Because one day you just might need it; one day, you might transform it into part of something amazing.”

Allow me to repeat that: *Never, ever, throw an old piece away. Because one day you just might need it; one day, you might transform it into part of something amazing.*”

That, my dear friends, is why I have a problem with clutter.

And that is also why I love the art of collage. The word “collage” comes from the French verb *coller*, meaning “to glue,” and it refers to both the technique and the resulting work of art in which fragments of paper and other materials are arranged and glued or otherwise affixed to a supporting surface.

Folks who know me well know that I am never happier than when I have a glue stick in my hand. They also know that I'm always on the lookout for old bits and bobs that might become part of a future collage. I like the term "bits and bobs" because it sounds vaguely British and elevates much of what I collect, which is what otherwise might be deemed trash.

I could argue that this is a form of recycling, which makes me feel better about my piles of junk. A collage artist repurposes old things in new and surprising ways. She looks at an object or an image and tries to envision what else it might become.

Much like a mosaic artist, a collage artist usually composes a work from many smaller pieces. But unlike a flat mosaic, most collages are composed of many layers.

Because a collage can have many layers, it is a "forgiving" medium in which to work. By "forgiving," I mean to say that the artist can make mistakes and it's easy to repair them. You can paint over them; rip off an old layer, or glue on a new one. You can't do that as easily with other media such as watercolor, pastel, pen and ink, oil and so on. In this congregation, we have accomplished artists who do beautiful work in these media, including Ilona Levitz, Karen Israel, Melinda Wright, Jean Mazo, and Sandra Hershson-Weiner. I admire what they do. But it's really hard. What they do is not so forgiving of mistakes.

For me, doing collage is freeing. I'm a busy person. I'm a planner and a list-maker, and I like to feel in control of situations. In general, that serves me well.

But when I'm working on a collage, I'm forced to let go of those tendencies. When I'm working on a piece, even if I *start off* with a plan, I'm forced to be open to the process, to see where the materials "lead me." I need to keep stepping back to re-evaluate the work as it develops, to stay flexible.

Those aren't skills that come naturally to me... indeed, to many of us. And in life, as well as in art, there are times when you've got to let loose a bit, adapt, and go with the flow. Now sometimes, when you do this, things turn out well. In art class, this is what my teacher calls a "happy accident."

Like when I plan to do one thing, but the paint spills or the pen smudges or the paper rips and I have to change direction and well, I realize I like it better.

Or not.

And then, I just start over with a whole new layer. Or cut the earlier work into pieces and rearrange those into a completely new configuration. Because...even if I paint over it, even if I cut it up and rearrange and glue and paint and glue and paint over again and again, I still have a chance to get it right, to keep building. That's what my teacher, Dianne, says, anyway. She says: "What do you like? Find that and build on it. Get rid of the rest. Just keep going. Look, you're not done. Maybe you're never done."

Maybe you're never done. One of my former collage teachers, Jill, has been working in this medium for many years and she says she occasionally goes back to an old piece and adds a little something to it. She likes to look over the layers that have been built up, and see if there's something more that's needed, now that time has passed.

In her intricate collage work, earlier layers peek through later ones, sometimes as tiny figures, sometimes only as pale shadows or raised shapes. What's underneath is present and adds richness to the work, even though it's masked by the layers over it.

I've long been drawn to the notion of layers. During the school year, on Wednesday mornings, I teach a Talmud class at the JCC, which I very much enjoy. (We have a very lively group of students – I invite you to drop in any time!) Together we explore the Talmud, which consists of passionate arguments about law and justice, intertwined with wild stories and musings about the meaning of life.

The Talmud is set up as a conversation among ancient rabbis who lived over many generations, and traditionally includes commentaries on those conversations, which give rise to further commentaries. We add our own voices to these many layers of discussion, building on what has come before us, adding new insights. Layer upon layer.

And then, right after teaching Talmud, I drive to my art class to do collage. More layers.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

The poet, Stanley Kunitz, lived to be 100 years old and was named Poet Laureate of the United States at the age of 95. When he was in his 70's, many of his mentors, and even some of his contemporaries had died and he wrote a poem looking both back and forward, which he called "The Layers."

"I have walked through many lives," he begins,
"some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon..."

Kunitz wonders how to deal with all his losses, wonders how he will go on.
He writes:

"Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
"Live in the layers,
not on the litter."
Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes."

Kunitz later said that the phrase “Live in the layers, not the litter” had come to him in a dream, that it had inspired the entire poem. By litter, did he mean the surface, the ephemeral, the superficial? He himself admits he is not sure. But he knows he must reclaim what is in the depths, what lies beneath the surface, in the layers.

My friends, we sit here in this beautiful sanctuary at the beginning of a brand-new year. It is the first day of a new Hebrew decade: 5780. We have never been here – by which I mean here together at this very moment in time - before.

But, then again, we have.

Some of us have been in this room on other Rosh Hashanah mornings. Some of us have sat in other sanctuaries, in other shuls, in years past.

We sit next to whomever we are here with today, but we also sit next to those who sat next to us years ago. Our mothers and fathers. Our grandparents. Our sisters or brothers. Childhood friends. Our own little ones, perhaps now become parents themselves.

We hear familiar tunes that bring us back. We remember the voices of old cantors, now long gone. We’re trying to recall their old tunes, now no longer sung.

Later, we’ll slather honey on apples and warm, round challah bread. We’ll eat honey cake or plum kuchen or apple crisp and the flavors and aromas will remind us of our Bubbies or Nonnas or Omas or Aunties.

It is the New Year of 5780 *and* it is every Rosh Hashanah we have ever celebrated. We live in the layers.

For some of us, this might be the first Rosh Hashanah we have spent in a synagogue in a long, long time. Or maybe ever. In that case, we are wondering if everyone else can tell how inexperienced we feel. We are here, but we are also living in the layers, recalling all those times in the past when we were the new kid, when everyone else seemed to know exactly what they were doing.

That's the peculiar thing about Rosh Hashanah. It seems to lead us backward and forward at once. Today brings us back in time. Back in a spiral circling back through our lifetimes. And not only through our own short lives.

During the Musaf service, in just a short while, the chanting of the *Amidah*, the main prayer, will be punctuated by three sets of shofar blasts and each time, those blasts will be followed by the declaration:

Hayom harat olam, hayom ya'amid ba-mishpat kol y'tzurei olamim.

"Today the world is born. Today all of Creation stands as it is called to judgment."

Hayom harat olam. "Today the world is born."

Rosh Hashanah not only marks the start of the new year, and this year, a new Hebrew decade; it is meant to mark the anniversary of Creation itself. As my beloved classmate and colleague, the late Rabbi Alan Lew wrote: "Rosh Hashanah is...the day that the world burst into being out of nothing, and it stands for both that event and its continuous renewal."

As if that weren't enough, the translation of *Hayom harat olam*. "Today the world is born" doesn't really convey the full meaning of the word "*harah*" which literally means "gestation" or "pregnancy." Rosh Hashanah, then, hearkens back to the beginning of the beginning, the moment "pregnant with potential, with possibility."

Hayom. Today. This moment.

We have been here before. Last year. The year before. We recall - in our bones and our bodies and our hearts - all the years. Layer upon layer of Rosh Hashanahs past. Layer upon layer of our lives.

The layers are bumpy and uneven. There are parts that are beautiful, though maybe they're difficult to discern. Maybe we should search for those pieces we loved and peel away some of the

detritus to reveal the beauty underneath. There are areas that have become muddied since we last looked. They need to be cleaned up and clarified. And yes, there are ugly parts that need to be faced; we've got to undo that damage as best we can, build another layer and move on. Because we're not yet done.

The layers – the evidence of our lives so far – those layers don't have to hold us back from making a new start. The layers, after all, make us who we are. The layers *are* who we are. The truth is, we don't ever start from scratch. But we can take those things we or others might have discarded, we can take lessons learned, even mistakes made and transform them into something good. Even into something *amazing*.

Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, wrote in 1941: "The time for repentance is Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the Creation of the world. This is because repentance ...is also a kind of creativity." [*Esh Kodesh*, quoted on p.157 *Mahzor Lev Shalem*]

"The Hebrew word *Teshuvah* means repentance and return. However, as a creative act, *teshuvah* is not a simple return. We return to who we are meant to be, but have not yet become. We return to growth and possibility that has lain dormant within us and not yet flourished." [*Mahzor Lev Shalem*]

Today is the day to begin. A day pregnant with potential. A day built on the possibility offered by *teshuvah*, by the power of human creativity mirroring God's own. A day when we are reminded that our choices, our lives, have not been carved in stone, but fashioned in a more "forgiving" medium, one that can be re-visited, added to and reconfigured from time to time.

My friends, as long as we're here, we're not done. It's time to take out our spiritual glue-sticks. *Hayom*. Today we start again.

Wishing all of you a *shannah tovah u'metukah* – a sweet, happy, healthy 5780! *Amen!*

