

As you may have noticed, I am not Student Rabbi Laura.

I am Student Rabbi Dan.

In addition to the obvious differences,

there are many aspects of the two of us that are not similar.

For example, I do not have the same gift of music that she possessed.

On the other hand, I pray that there are parts of myself that I **can** share with you, that will add meaning and guidance to this community throughout the year.

Even if you are accustomed to seeing a new face on the bimah every year or two, this transition can present uncertainties and maybe even some discomfort.

Any type of change, large or small, can bring with it a set of fears and anxieties.

As human beings, we are creatures of habit.

We create routines in our life to help give us a sense of control and order.

If we look at Jewish tradition and our creation story,

the very beginning of our sacred text

is an account of God creating order from chaos.

In many ways we try to emulate God.

In fact, much of Jewish ritual is based in the notion

of helping us mark time and transitions by giving them meaning and structure.

Part of my job is to help facilitate these transitions for this community within a Jewish context.

And my presence here, especially during this first visit, means only one thing:

A new year has begun.

Well, more accurately, a new year is about to begin in two weeks.

In this week's Torah Portion,

the Israelites stand ready to embark on the greatest change of their lives.

After wandering in the wilderness for 40 years,

they are about to cross the Jordan river and settle in the promised land.

We can only imagine the transition they faced, literally right in front of them.

How can a people, who grew up as a nomadic tribe, prepare to settle down in one place?

How can a people, who had no land to call their own,

be ready to embrace their ancestral homeland?

Well, I'll tell you. They prepared themselves, and marked the event with a ritual.

Picture, if you will, Moses standing before the assembled community of Israelites giving them his final address.

Even though he cannot enter the land with them,

he helps them with the final preparations necessary to create a new life for themselves.

Upon entering the land, the Israelites are instructed to bring an offering of their first fruits to a Cohen, a priest.

Then, he guides them in the recitation of the following passage:

"My father was a wandering Aramean.

He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there;

but there he became a great and very populous nation.

*The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us;
they imposed heavy labor upon us.
We cried to Adonai, the God of our fathers and mothers,
and Adonai heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression.
Adonai freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, and by an outstretched arm
with awesome power, and with signs and portents.
He brought us to this place and gave us this land,
a land flowing with milk and honey.
Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil
which You, Adonai, have given me."*

Each Israelite, in order to help make the transition to this new, holy place,
needed to review his/her past.
They were not able to move forward,
without first looking back to see from where they had come.

The same is true with the upcoming High Holidays.
They mark a transition for us, a placeholder in time
to acknowledge that yet another year has passed.
We, too, cannot move forward without first looking at our past.
What has been your journey bringing you to this time and place?
What was **your** wilderness?
We stand on the brink of a new year, a new beginning.
We cannot enter this new place without the proper preparations.

As Jews, we are given the Hebrew month of *Elul* to prepare.
If you have not already begun,
fortunately we still have two more weeks.
The Israelites did not dare enter the new land without first being ready.
Even with the protection of God, they needed a plan.
For us, even though this transition is less physical
and more spiritual, more temporal - it is no less real.

There was another important aspect of this ancient Israelite ritual --
it was the act of giving *tzedakah* to the less fortunate.
The children of Israel are instructed to bring one-tenth of their crops
and give them to the orphan, to the widow, to the stranger.
Why during such a difficult time,
during such a change of substantial proportions,
are they commanded to think of others?
Shouldn't they be allowed to focus on their own issues of transition and change?

There is a scene from *Fiddler on the roof* that may answer this question.
Nahum the beggar is in the center of town when Lazar Wolf approaches
to give him *tzedakah*.

Nahum, the Beggar says -- "Alms for the poor, alms for the poor!"
Lazar Wolf replies -- "Here, Nahum, here's one kopeck."

(Nahum) -- "One kopeck? Last week you gave me two kopecks!"

(Lazar Wolf) -- "I had a bad week."

(Nahum) -- "So you had a bad week? Why should I suffer?"

I think this scene illustrates a simple point.

Just because we are going through difficult times,

financial, spiritual, emotional or otherwise,

doesn't mean that those who are less fortunate than ourselves, don't still need help. Even when the Israelites are preparing to make the most difficult transition of their lives, they are reminded to still help those in need.

However,

I think there is another reason tzedakah is such an important part of this process.

In some ways, it helps to put our own lives into perspective.

Whatever difficulties we may be facing, at the very least

we are not sleeping on the street wondering where our next meal will come from.

This is not to diminish our own troubles, far from it.

It is to help us to appreciate what we **do** have, which in turn, will help us through difficult transitions.

I'm sure you have many organizations

to which you feel comfortable donating your time or other resources.

Although, at this point, I'd like to make a quick plug

for one of my favorite Jewish charitable organizations.

It is called Mazon, which means sustenance, and it's goal is to combat hunger, both on the individual level and the systematic.

When throwing a large celebration or simcha,

they suggest donating 3% of the total cost of the event.

If you are interested in learning more about it, you can visit them online at mazon.org or you can speak to me following services.

Okay, back to Moses and the children of Israel.

The final aspect of the transition ritual involved renewing their promise to God.

They reviewed the mitzvot, the commandments,

and promised to do their part to uphold them.

And in return, God promised to bless them

and to make their lives in the new land successful and prosperous.

So what does this mean for us?

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a good opportunity to be introspective

and to make an attempt to renew our commitment to Judaism and to Jewish practices. For example, if you don't light candles in your home on Shabbat,

perhaps now is a good time to experiment with this ritual.

Or perhaps you'd like to learn more about Judaism in general.

You have the perfect opportunity with our Torah study tomorrow morning

and with our Adult Education classes on Sunday.

The High Holidays are an opportunity for us to step back and look at our lives.

Are you happy with the way you are leading your life?

Are you fearful of change?

As a community we come together to build up our collective courage
to face the new year with vigor and determination.
We help each other commit to change and to growth,
even if it means facing the uncertain or feeling uncomfortable.
This community, more than others,
understands the power and strength which comes from communal support.

So here we are, on the verge of a new year,
with a world of infinite possibilities before us.
But before we can move forward, we must first look back.
And before we can look inward, we must look around.
We must look at those who need our help
and we must look to the community which will be our support.

May this new year be a year of blessings for all of us.
May we grow as individuals and as a community.
May God grant us God's most precious gift, the gift of peace.
Ken Ye'hi ratzon, may it be God's will.
And together we say, Amen.