

“Holding On To the Past and Present, While Moving Into the Future”
דבר תורה (sermon) for Yom Kippur 5770 (2009)

Today, we put a final seal on last year, the year 5769 as we move forward into the year 5770. We know that last year had its share of triumphs and tragedies, gains and losses. We observe Yom Kippur as a reminder that this new year, should be different than last year . . . better than last year. Will we succeed in our endeavor? Or will we be back in Temple Israel next year, as the same people who gathered here today?

Change, of course, isn't easy. As human beings, we tend to get very comfortable in life. We all feel that we, ourselves, are relatively descent individuals. Do we really need to push ourselves for more? Why not just leave well enough alone?

Besides, there are some parts of our lives that are very precious to us. If we change our lives – even if ultimately it is a change for the better – perhaps we'll have to move on from some precious facet in our lives. How can we bring ourselves do that? It's a very scary thought that we might have to stop doing something we love to do in order to achieve some greater goal in the future, isn't it? And so, sometimes we cling to what is comfortable, rather than launching ourselves into a new future.

What is true about our present, is also true about our past. Oftentimes we fear that change with threaten our memory of the past. Every change we make puts a little more psychological distance between us and our fondest memories of old. And we certainly would not want to lose those memories. There is a song playing on the radio nowadays that is a beautiful expression of how precious those memories can be. The song, sung by Luther Vandross, is called “Dance With My Father.” In the song, Vandross describes his fond memories of his father. Mostly, he speaks of how his father would hold him while his father danced with his mother. Vandross sings about how he would love to have the chance to return to that most innocent and blissful moment of love.

If I could steal one final glance
One final step, one final dance with him
I'd play a song that would never, ever end
Cause I'd love, love, love to dance with my father again.

We all understand what Vandross is saying. There are people who were in our lives, there are times of our lives, that we'd give almost anything to return to. I think we often worry that changes in our lives will cause those memories of the past to fade.

Oftentimes, our comfort with the present and our nostalgia for the past becomes a barrier to a better future. But it doesn't have to be that way. Change does not have to include an abandonment of the past or rejection of that which is good about our present lives. Rather, change should be an amplification of the values that have given our lives the most meaning. To carry Vandross's method forward a bit, he says that he'd “love, love, love to dance with my father again.” He misses the feeling of pure warmth and love that was in those moments. Alas, he won't be able to dance with his father again, but hopefully he will be able to keep dancing.

It's ironic, but poignant, that Yom Kippur, which is designed to be a launching pad into the future, also includes the service we are about to recite – the Yizkor service, in which we remember our lost loved ones. Like in Vandross's song, we long for those loved ones.

If we could steal one final glance
One final step, one final dance with them
We'd play a song that would never, ever end
Cause We'd love, love, love to dance with our loved ones again.

Unfortunately, that last dance is not meant to be. However, we are meant to keep on dancing into the future. We are meant to carry their memories with us as an inspiration. We can remember what they taught us. Their values, their demeanor. We can remember the most wonderful things that they did in their lives, and try to emulate their accomplishments in our lives. We can't let our longing for the past stop us from building our future. Rather than being heirlooms, our memories must be our inspiration toward a better tomorrow.

How will you build a better tomorrow for yourself? Hopefully, rather than tearing down the past, you will build upon it. Take your moments of faith, and let them grow. Study your faith, so that your expressions of faith can be more numerous and more meaningful in the future. Increase your acts of charity so that your impact on this world is more than it used to be. Hold fast to the memory of your loved ones, and emulate their best aspects in your life. Give your children an education and a role model, so that your works may stretch beyond your days.

After the Yizkor service, we will return the Torah to the ark and sing the words of hope from the book of lamentations *ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁוֹבָה הַדָּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם* *return us to You, oh LORD and we will return, renew our days as of old.*¹ The path to change is one not of retaining the status quo, nor of rejecting it in its entirety. Rather, the path to change is through a renewal that builds on the days of old.

The truth is, it is impossible to hold on to the past. Life constantly changes. Some days we mourn the loss of a loved one, while other days we celebrate the birth of a new generation. Some days we make new friends, while on other days we may have to distance ourselves from old friends in order to move forward in our lives. There are many times that we wish we could keep things simple by resisting those changes and holding on to our present and our past. The most precious parts of our life in the past are things that we'd do anything in our power to hold on to. But that's impossible. Life often forces us to move forward – sometimes for the better, and sometimes for the worse. Life does change . . . and life will change. And what's more, we constantly try to change our lives for the better. Our goal is not to reject our past nor should we try to run away from our present. Our true goal is to keep our past and present from being an anchor locking us down, and instead make them into a lighthouse guiding us into the future. May God grant us the blessing of wonderful memories and may God help us find even better, happier, and more meaningful lives in the years to come. And let us say, Amen.

¹ Lamentations 5:21.