

Chadeish Yameinu K'Kedem: Renew Us as in Days of Old
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This morning I want to share with you the most Jewish sentence in the world, a sentence I believe reflects an essential truth of Jewish identity and the crux of the contemporary Jewish project. “Chadesh Yameinu K'Kedem,” Renew us as in Days of Old. This sentence is an oxymoron. Of course it is, the most Jewish sentence in the world is definitely going to be an oxymoron. How can we be renewed like the old days? If they're old, they're not new!

All jokes aside, this quest to synthesize tradition with innovation is the central project of twenty-first-century Judaism. Our job as committed modern Jews is to continue the renewal of our tradition so that it is as rich, vibrant, and meaningful as it has always been. Fortunately, we have several examples of how to do this, because it has been the central project of Jews in **every** century. Honestly, do we think we're the first Jews who have struggled to reconcile our past with our present? No. This quest to renew our tradition goes all the way back to when our tradition was first new!

At the moment of our religious conception, Moshe sat atop Mount Sinai watching HaShem meticulously inscribe every letter exactly where it needed to go in the Torah. He noticed that some of the letters had little flourishes, little crowns. So he asked HaShem, “what are these decorative crowns for?” HaShem told him, “Many generations from now there is going to be a rabbi named Akiva.” Then HaShem had to pause to explain what a rabbi was, because there weren't rabbis in the time of the Torah. HaShem continued, “there is going to be a rabbi named Akiva who will infer many important laws and insights based on the placement of these decorations.” Moshe was impressed, he

told HaShem, “I wish I could meet that Rabbi Akiva.” So HaShem took Moshe into the future to see Rabbi Akiva’s classroom.

Moshe sat and listened and the more he listened the more he grew confused. Rabbi Akiva was talking about all these things he had never heard of, like separating meat dishes from dairy dishes, and wearing tefillin. Moshe was getting more and more upset. Was this Rabbi Akiva a heretic, was he making stuff up? Was he, Moshe, stupid or somehow misunderstanding the truth of HaShem’s Torah? He was so distraught and just as he was starting to cry he heard a student across the room ask, “Rabbi, how do you know this?” Rabbi Akiva answered, “this is Torah given to Moshe at Sinai!”¹

Rabbi Akiva attributed all these insights to Moshe at Sinai even though Moshe himself never heard of what Akiva was teaching. Of course Rabbi Akiva knew that his teaching in the first century of this Common Era was very different from what Moshe was writing at Sinai 1400 years earlier, and he wasn’t trying to fool anyone into thinking he was saying the exact same things. Still, Rabbi Akiva meant it when he said his insights were part of the Torah given to Moshe at Sinai. He was living out this verse, “chadeish yameinu k’kedem, renew us as in days of old,” by bringing contemporary relevant life and meaning to the words Moshe wrote at Sinai.

This is **the** story from which the rabbis of the Talmud claim authority to interpret Torah for their generation, and it is likewise the story on which our authority to innovate also rests. Remember that the ancient rabbis began their Talmudic project in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, sometime soon after the year 70 CE. Before the

¹ Talmud Bavli, Menachot 25b.

Roman conquest, the main focus of Jewish ritual life had been bringing *korbanot*, offerings, to the Temple in Jerusalem. Some of the first contributors to the Talmud lived through the siege of the Romans and the sack on Jerusalem, and saw their religion crumble before their very eyes. They then relocated to a place in Northern Israel called Yavneh and tasked themselves with the renewal and reinvention of the religion they cherished. There was no longer a way to bring *korbanot*, no longer a cohort of Cohanim to direct ritual life, no longer a Jewish authority to govern religious or civilian matters. The entire project of the Talmud was to reinvent Judaism from the literal ashes of the destruction and to then connect that new Judaism to the Judaism they had been practicing before.

The rabbis used the tradition to enrich and support their new project, and they used their new project of Rabbinic Judaism to carry the tradition forward. They instituted liturgy that yearned for what we have lost while also celebrating our resilience. They built the entire schedule of daily prayer around the schedule that once governed offerings in the Temple. The foundation of Temple ritual lent credence to their new adaptations for Jewish life without a physical building. They invented the holiday of Tisha B'Av to mourn what they had lost and to triumphantly proclaim "we are still here."

I don't know if the rabbis of the Talmud sincerely believed Judaism would survive the destruction of the Temple, but here we are two thousand years later, on a continent they've never heard of, with a woman rabbi, gathered together live and broadcasting on zoom. If they saw us now I think they would have a few questions. But I **know** they would be proud of all we have done, and they would want us to carry on their tradition of ensuring Judaism's continuity by combining tradition with innovation. **This is our holy task: to nurture and grow our spiritual tradition.** What insights will the

Rabbi Akiva's of our generation derive from the thousands of years of tradition? How will we share those insights with future Jews? These are not small questions. In order to decide what to pass on, we need a deep understanding of both our tradition and of the world in which we want our tradition to live. As Dara Horn puts it, "How do you find your place in the world while the world is in motion? How do you hold fast to that constant point of stillness as all else changes."² How will we receive what has been handed to us, and pass it on to our children?

There is a great example of two ways to approach this question in the classic TV series, *Gilmore Girls*. In season four, one of the title characters, Lorelai Gilmore, is attempting to restore an historic country inn. Unfortunately the cantankerous town alderman, Taylor Dose, has some other ideas. When he goes out to inspect the site, he tells her "Lorelei this porch is rotting away and full of termites, it's terrible!" She tells him "yes Taylor we know, it's the first thing to go." "Go?!" He's shocked. "It can't go! You have to keep it! It's historic. Maybe you could build a transparent lucite porch over this porch so people could walk on the lucite porch and see the old porch underneath the new one?!"

This is obviously exaggerated for comedic effect but it gets to the heart of an important issue that we as twenty-first century Jews experience every day. We often ask ourselves **which** parts of our tradition we want to preserve, but an equally important question is **how** we want to preserve the tradition. One way to serve our loyalty is to take exactly what has been given to us and give that very same thing to our children, changing nothing even as the world changes around us. That's orthodoxy, that's what

² Dara Horn *People Love Dead Jews* p223

the Hareidim wearing their 18th century Polish knee socks are doing, and that's a valid enterprise. If you do it that way, you can be sure you at least didn't mess it up. But that is not very interesting or exciting. The old ways will eventually come to be stale because there is not enough room to grow as we learn and discover new ideas. One example in the case of ultra-orthodoxy, is that there is simply not enough room in the ultra-orthodox way of life to accommodate gender diversity, equity, and equality.

Another way to act out our loyalty is to constantly update our religion to be in lock step with modern values to make sure we are always relevant and acceptable to everyone. But we would lose a great deal if we chose to leave so much behind. Judaism has an important role as an ancient tradition, with thousands of years' worth of wisdom, to hold fast to what we do well. For example, the current pressures of consumer capitalism are destroying our environment and our mental health along with it, and Judaism's commitment to a day of rest every Shabbat is a strong, valuable, counter-cultural "No" in the face of these destructive trends. Judaism has purpose and value to contribute to the world, a distinct voice to raise and say "we have been doing this for thousands of years and we have some important wisdom to share."

As committed modern Jews, we feel ourselves balanced perilously on the tightrope that spans tradition and progress. We can take comfort in remembering the teaching from Pirkei Avot, that the tightrope extends all the way back to Moshe, to Joshua, to the Judges, to the Prophets, to the Sages of the Talmud, through the Jews of Medieval Europe, all the way to us.³ Our ancestors have maintained this balance for thousands of years, and we can too.

³ Pirkei Avot 1:1

In her book *Rereading the Rabbis*, my-teacher-my-Rabbi Dr. Judith Hauptman argues that the Rabbis of the Talmud, who we commonly view as the original codifiers of *halacha*, were also the original progressives. They pushed the limits of what was halachically and societally acceptable in order to shape the world into what they believed it should be. For example, the rabbis of the Mishnah expanded beyond the provisions of Biblical law to compensate a woman directly for any wrongs perpetrated against her, rather than simply compensating her male relatives. They also stretched the limits of Biblical divorce law to make sure that a man could not baselessly exploit the get-granting process. In these and many other cases, they built upon the foundation of the mitzvot to make sure the Jews of their time could live within the halakhic framework. Rabbi Hauptman herself followed in this tradition, as she was the first woman to earn a Ph.D in Talmud.

Similarly, my-teacher-my-Rabbi Benay Lappe sees the Talmudic sages as the original radicals.⁴ The rabbis quoted in the Talmud took their religious enterprise north to Yavneh, and kept it alive. They did more than keep it alive, they made Rabbinic Judaism into a relevant and meaningful way for their peers to answer the most pressing existential questions of their time: how do we do Judaism without the Temple? Rabbi Lappe suggests that we are meant to undertake a similar task of growth and renewal for ourselves and our descendants.

We know from the Talmud story I quoted earlier that even though Moshe did not recognize the Judaism of the rabbis, he loved it anyway. That story ends with Moshe in awe of Rabbi Akiva, asking God why the Torah is given through Moshe when Akiva is

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBWIEAR_GQY

obviously so much wiser.⁵ The rabbis of the Talmud did not even know about the continent we live on, so you can be sure they would be surprised by a lot of elements of twenty-first century Jewish life. Yet we study and revere and preserve this text in a way I know they would admire. Rabbi Lappe suggests that we might not recognize every element of whatever Judaism exists in another 500 or 1,000 years, and **that is how it is supposed to be.** Judaism exists today, more than three thousand years after Moshe came down from Sinai, almost 2,000 years after the fall of the Second Temple, because we have kept the essence of our faith and our relationship with God and brought those elements with us to all of the new times and places.

When we come across the words “Chadeish Yameinu K’Kedem” in our liturgy in a few moments, as we return the Torah to the ark, we see a commentary from Rabbi Rober Schenberg, “This means, “Renew our lives, as you renewed our lives after we were exiled from the Garden of Eden.” Hadesh yameinu ke-kedem is not a plea for restoration of a formerly perfect condition, but rather it is a plea for resilience, a plea for the ability to renew ourselves after future crises and dislocations, just as our lives have been renewed before. As Elie Wiesel said, “God gave Adam a secret — and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again.”⁶ This liturgical plea is not asking HaShem to bring us back in time. It is asking HaShem to keep bringing us forward, as we have been going forward for thousands of years.

We have a beautiful history as a people, passed down to us by beloved ancestors, and we all want to pass on a cherished legacy to those who come after us. Sometimes it

⁵ Talmud Bavli Menachot 25b.

⁶ Rabbi Robert Scheinberg Lev Shalem p123

is tempting to let our nostalgia for our ancestors and our past stand in the way. We like the songs the way we sing them because that's the way we know them and learning new music in another language is hard. It's scary to change the way we eat or pray or gather. But if we never change anything we are going to end up admiring a rotten porch from a plastic bridge. I know that when we look into our hearts, we all want our loyalty to motivate us to keep our beautiful tradition alive, strong, and functional. We have already accomplished so much with programs like SholomPlex and HaYom, with our new machzors, and with new music our interns have been teaching us for traditional prayers alongside our amazing lay-lead throwback Shabbat. We will continue to hold fast to our commitments to Hebrew, Shabbat, and Kashrut, while at the same time finding new ways to make these practices accessible and meaningful to everyone. We want to maintain that porch, replace the rotten boards, and give it a fresh coat of paint so that people can walk up to our front door and come inside to experience all we have to offer.

We take on this task anew every single day, and especially on this day that begins the revolution of a new year. Revolution means to overturn **and** to go back! Every day we go back to that very first moment of creation and that very first moment of revelation at Sinai, and bring those experiences into the world again in a new light. Those of you who joined us in the HaYom tent heard Rabbi Josh Warshawsky's original arrangement "Ha-meirah," quoting our liturgy. God renews creation **every** day. As Jews made in God's image, we have been reinventing and recreating ourselves since Judaism began and we will continue to do so as we entrust our tradition to the next generation. I invite everyone here today to join me in opening our minds to new approaches, new music, new programs, and new friends to share in the tradition we love. I challenge you to

attend one program this year that you have never attended before - try a new session at ShalomPlex, come join our intern Elisheva at her music learning sessions or join Lee Gartenberg in leading Throwback Shabbat. Invite a friend to join you, maybe even a friend who is new to the TBS community. If everyone here does one new thing to demonstrate, to ourselves and this community, our commitment to renewing our tradition, we will enjoy a truly sweet year together. Together, **we must embrace the innovation that is inherent to our tradition and personally take on these challenges in order to ensure our legacy. Chadeish Yameinu K'Kedem. In this New Year, let us renew ourselves as in days of old. Shanah Tovah.**