

If you were to pick up my phone, you might notice that I have 7,141 photos and 209 videos. Perhaps a little excessive, but I can't bear to part with precious memories. Like many of us with friends and family in other parts of the country, we're all constantly sharing with each other.

So the other day, I started scrolling through those 209 videos.

And I found a lot of things.

I found a video from a Nuggets game we went to in December in which I documented my ignorance of the game of basketball and that I, in fact, had a very poor understanding of what was happening.

I found a video of my future sister-in-law crossing the finish line of the Boston Marathon, and not only making it across but sprinting the final stretch.

I found a video of the incredible combined interfaith choir that sang here in this sanctuary at the Martin Luther King Day celebration.

And I found quite a collection of videos I've received from our preschool parents, videos of our little 3 year old friends saying hi and singing Shabbat songs, making my heart swell each time one of their little voices says "Rabbi Jordy."

As I scrolled through memory after memory,

I found a video starring my Bobey, my grandmother, and my parents dog, Kugel.

Yes, they named the dog Kugel.

The video was taken on July 2, 2018.

The evening of July 7<sup>th</sup>, she would have a massive brain hemorrhage and leave us suddenly but peacefully, a few months shy of her 96<sup>th</sup> birthday.

But we didn't know any of that yet.

On July 2, my parents,

my brother and his then girlfriend and now fiancé

and me and my then fiancé and now husband

sat on the floor of the living room of her assisted living apartment and I took a video as she fed the dog a slice of cheese.

It may not sound like a big deal... but you didn't know Marilyn Greenfield.  
She was my best friend and one of my favorite people in the world,  
but man she could be tough.  
And stubborn. Hard-headed.  
Certain that what she'd always known and always done  
was right.

5 years earlier when my parents had told her they were getting a puppy as a response to  
empty nesthood as my brother went off to college, she was outraged.  
She said she'd never step foot in their house again.  
She couldn't imagine why anyone would ever bring an animal into their home.

She had lived 90 years with a fear of dogs,  
Not a fear that was grounded in any traumatic childhood experience,  
More so something that might have begun with a neighbors dog who barked too loudly  
when she was a kid  
and just snowballed downhill, collecting one inconsequential moment after another for  
nine decades until it became a full blown fear and a genuine disdain.

So my parents got a puppy and she was terrified – terrified of five, fluffy pounds with big  
eyes who was named after a noodle dish.  
But to our surprise, slowly, she began to fear the dog less and less.  
He was a little puppy – how bad could it be?  
But she definitely didn't like him.

When Kugel was a few months old, I happened to be at my parents and picked him up from  
the groomer.  
He was so soft and smelled good and he had that post-groomer excitement where he's just  
so happy to be back with his people again.

At the time, my Bobey lived 4 minutes down the street from my parents so on my way home from the groomer I called – “hey Bub. I’m coming over. I’ll be there in a few.”

She buzzed me into her apartment building and when she opened the door, she was a bit surprised to see me holding the little ball of brown fur we called a puppy.

She sat in her chair by the kitchen table next to the corded phone on the wall which was constantly ringing with calls from all over the country, acquaintances and friendships she maintained over the phone for decades.

As she settled into her seat I said “Bobey, he’s so soft. You have to rub his back. Its so relaxing” almost pleading with her. I held our very gentle puppy within her reach. She tentatively stretched out her hand and briefly put it on his back  
“Ya, he is really soft” she said, almost reluctant to admit it.

That felt like enough of a win and so I settled into the chair across from her with Kugel falling asleep in my lap.

As we chatted, she seemed distracted.

Eventually, eyes on Kugel she said, “look at him”

“I think... I think he looks hungry.

Do you think he’s hungry?

What can you even give one of them?”

I tried not to smile too big and make her feel silly so I just said,

“Got any cheese?”

She pulled the square container out of her fridge that housed the individually wrapped slices of a product the Kraft corporation wants us to believe is cheese.

At the opening of the packaging, Kugel’s ears perked up and he jumped off of my lap to the floor.

And there they were, staring each other down, a Bobey and a puppy – neither quite sure what to do.

Kugel began to move towards her and so she nervously flung the whole slice of cheese at him.

He ate it. She watched.

“Do you think he’s still hungry? I think he still looks hungry”

The next slice of cheese she didn’t throw quite as far.

Leave it to a Jewish grandmother to bond over a deep seeded belief that someone was hungry and needed to be fed.

After 90 years of a fear and a hatred of dogs, Kugel grew on her.

When he did anything more than simply laying on the floor she’d beam with a grandmotherly pride - “oh look at him! He’s so smart! Look how smart he is!”

at which point we would all affirm that he was brilliant because he knew how do something like scratch his own itch.

She would sit on the couch and he’d come cuddle up next to her and she’d stroke his back for hours.

If she wanted him to come to her, she’d call to him with a voice that was at once both stern and affectionate - “Kugel, come to Bobey. Come see Bobey.”

On July 2, 2018 at nearly 96 years old, my Bobey sat in her chair as I video’d her from the floor - tearing off the tiniest pieces of a slice of manufactured cheese and hand feeding it to her grandpuppy,

The woman who five years earlier flung a slice of cheese across the floor was now gently offering piece by piece right into his mouth as she lovingly encouraged him “good boy, good boy.”

A stubborn, relentless, sometimes even defiant woman in her 90s did something incredible - she got out of her own way.

She let go of fears and ideas that no longer served her.

She changed.

We often ask the question, can people change?

Is that possible? Within our capabilities as humans?

To learn and adapt and change not only our behavior, but sometimes to change tiny pieces of who we are to improve ourselves.

The deep-seeded Jewish belief is yes.

As Rabbi Sidney Greenberg wrote in his book Say Yes to Life:

“Judaism rejects any and every kind of fatalism that denies us the freedom to choose our way and strike out in new directions. We are not enslaved by impersonal nature, nor are we subject to the influence of the stars or planets.”

Tonight we begin our high holy day experience, these Days of Awe, and everything we will do for the next 10 days is predicated on the idea that we - can - change.

We'll hear the blast of the shofar,

Its abrupt and stirring voice

Waking us up for a cheshbon hanefesh, an accounting of the soul.

We'll repeat over and over “al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha” – the sin we have committed against you “Cheit” we translate as “the sin” but it's really a word taken from the Torah rooted in archery practices, describing shots that are taken but not successful.

Al cheit shechatanu lifanecha – we acknowledge the moments when we missed the mark.

We'll beat our chests – ashamnu, bagadnu – as we own up to our shortcomings in the past year and take every opportunity to make amends, to apologize to those we've wronged and those we've hurt.

And what is an apology but a verbal commitment to change our behavior.

All of these experiences, with both spiritual and visceral connections, are aimed at acknowledging where we've been so that we can decide where we're going.

We draw mental maps, one of the year past and one of the year that's coming.

But that's not the end – we then have to layer those maps on top of one another.

The pathways should not like the same. There should be change.

It's seductive to think that at certain times and life moments, we're fully developed.

We've found ourselves. We are who we are.

But fully developed can too easily be code for “done changing.”

Are we living if we aren't growing? If we aren't learning? If we aren't evolving.

Are we living if we aren't changing?

The Talmud tells us to be like a reed and not a cedar.

This idea isn't unique to Judaism necessarily, one of Aesop's fables is actually called “The Oak and the Reed” and speaks to a similar idea.

The Talmud tells us in tractate Taanit that a person should try to be like a reed and not a cedar.

We might have thought the opposite!

That we should be like a cedar tree – solid, rooted, holding strong at all times and seasons.

But the Talmud tells us to be like reeds.

The Talmud tells a story that Ahijah the Shilonite curses the Jewish people by comparing them to a reed saying, “For the Lord will smite Israel as a reed is shaken in the water.”

This seems like a curse, but Rabbi Yohanan explains no, it's actually a blessing

A reed stands in a place of water and its shoots replenish themselves,

A reed's roots are numerous for a plant of its size,  
With such a strong reach and grasp that they actually anchor a marsh and a shoreline,  
they hold down the earth and the earth holds them up.

And perhaps most importantly –

A reed sways with the winds.

If all the winds in the world come and blow against it,

they cannot move a reed from its place

it sways with winds and as they subside, there stands the reed.

Be like a reed not a cedar.

They both hold strong to who they are,

But a reed is willing to be flexible.

A reed responds to its world – it is willing to be swayed in the wind and to be blown into  
new directions.

A reed will not let go of its hold to the earth, a reed will not change everything about itself,

But it will blow in the wind,

it is willing to move and bend and change.

My Bobey is gone – we marked her second yahrtzeit this summer.

But if you opened my parent's fridge today, you'd see the same square container that's  
probably older than I am, filled with individually wrapped cheese slices.

The words "Bobey cheese" will wake the dog out of a sound sleep – he will come running,  
he knows those words.

To him, those words means he gets to do his most favorite thing in the world, eat cheese.

To me, those words mean that it's never too late to change, to redirect.

To let go of what we don't need, to push ourselves further.

The Hasidic rebbe, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov used to say that this was, in fact, exactly what it meant to be a Hebrew, to be a Jew. The word for Hebrew is "ivri" meaning one who crosses over boundaries and obstacles.

The world we're living in today is big and scary.

There is plenty to fear, plenty that might hold us back or limit us whether we like it or not. That's out of our control.

But what we can do is let go of our self-imposed limits,

The lines we've drawn in the sand  
whether consciously or unconsciously  
that hold us back.

As we embark into 5781 together,

let's remember to be like reeds –

to root ourselves in our community and in our core identities,

to find a place to hold together with our presence and to hold us up when we need it

but also to sway in the wind

to be open to where it may bend us.

Remember the Bobey cheese and remember that we can change if we allow ourselves to.

L'shana tova umetukah – to a sweet new year.