

Who, me?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Another year has gone by.

When I was young there was a popular folk, student song that referred to a Kentucky coal miner during the Depression. The refrain went "You load sixteen tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt. St. Peter don't you call me, 'cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the company store." I guess it was a "those days" version of rap. But the fact is that for many of us it is a very appropriate chorus this time of the year. Another year older and what have we got?

You might accuse me of being unduly cynical and world-weary. But I remember in my first, let's call it "little" yeshivah, youngsters who prayed and cried and shook and swayed with the utmost fervor over the Holy Days, or more accurately the Days of Awe. Looking at them you might have thought they carried the weight of the world on their little prepubescent shoulders and were actual saints in pious fear of Heaven. But the moment the Gates were closed and we leapt from awe to joy, they were just as mean and nasty as they were before. Later when I saw this all repeated at the "big" yeshivahs I attended, I realized the little ones were just aping the big ones, who were aping their parents, who had aped theirs.

I know I should not generalize. There are wonderful, genuine saints around, albeit few and far between, and usually anonymous because those who crave attention are rarely saints. But over the years, regardless of community or synagogue or ethnicity or degree of religiosity, all the good intentions seem to fly out the window. After the awesome days of introspection and determination to improve almost everyone returns to old habits, learned patterns of behavior, and characteristics. That's human nature. Human nature is made up of different elements and drives. Some are better, some worse. The whole of our lives are lived shuttling and rebounding between the two extremes. I don't say a person cannot change. But only a minority does. It's rare. That's why successful relationships depend on accepting the other as she or he is, in working with the material rather than expecting that one will change the other.

In theory this is the same for the big, wide world outside. Last year this time I had a sort of fear list that revolved around Iran getting the bomb and drop it on Israel. But I did not imagine Russian imperialism, another war in Gaza, that anti-Semitism would rise up again around the world, that religious fanatics would spread and impose their sick and evil mental diseases on others, that nationalism would increase, that sicknesses and epidemics would explode around the world. Hundreds of thousands of refugees, mainly Muslim, risked death to reach Europe. Hondurans fled to America. Economies struggled. All bad stuff. But world poverty receded, world health improved, and some countries and religions actually did learn to get on better with others and not find scapegoats to cover their abysmal failures.

I live in two worlds: a Jewish world and a secular one. In my Jewish world the rabbinical pursuit of power continued, the idiotic attempts to impose excessive religious standards increased in the Diaspora and in Israel. In Israel politics continued to weave its corrupt web from the top down. Society is split and divided. Offering and taking bribes or going to jail seems to be the new norm. But there is another side. The increase in the number of ethically animated schools and yeshivot, the increase in charitable work and giving to offset the reduction in government handouts, the persevering attempts to reach out to the other side. The continuing growth of scholarship, research, and achievement, despite the military burden. All these things are heartening and bode well for the future. And Israel, for all its complexities, contradictions, absurdities, and frustrations is growing stronger and better and more successful. But yes, we Jews always want more and better.

In the USA, this year has brought the continuing failure to reform taxation, immigration, and financial regulation, political gerrymandering, and incredible government waste and incompetence. If you think Israeli politics is corrupt, try looking at the American system, where big money can now give as much as it wants to politicians through crazy but legal mechanisms. And there were race riots in Ferguson. If the USA, after hundreds of years and with untold wealth, hasn't dealt with its social and communal issues, why are we surprised that Israel is not doing a good enough job with its Jewish and Arab minorities? As for Great Britain, the United Kingdom, despite the Queen, it is neither great nor united. And France is the sick man of Europe. So wherever you look you can see massive problems that are neither being dealt with nor solved.

But yes, we Jews like to navel gaze and wonder what's wrong and be self-critical. In truth we must. That is part of our tradition, and that is what the coming "Days of Awe" institutionalize. We are puny things, we humans. We have no idea what this year or any year will bring. Or when any one of us might be struck down by a bullet or disease. The currents of history ebb and flow around us as we speak and we cannot know what will happen until it has happened.

We should not despair. Even if we cannot change society, the world, or even our partners, we must at least try to change ourselves in however small a way, because something is always better than nothing. So please don't look at your neighbor in the synagogue and think what a corrupt, nasty hypocrite he or she is. He or she may well be. But your task is to make sure everyone else doesn't think the same about you! Don't focus on the negative things, the bad people, and the deformed ideas. Just think of the good and how fortunate we are that, in some measure, our destiny is in our hands too.

As the Talmud says, "The universe runs according to its own rules." But we humans can run a long way according to ours.

Shanah Tovah.