

TOWARD A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2015

Shanah Tova!

I recently learned about a new game, though I've never played it. It's called "Corporate Bingo" and it goes something like this.

It takes place in a corporate boardroom – maybe a Board meeting, or a sales conference or some other boring confab, and you're looking for something to keep you awake. So you take some paper and, holding it just below the level of the table, you draw a grid of 25 boxes – a 5x5 square that looks like a bingo card. In each square, you write one of the latest buzz words or phrases that often come up in such meetings – terms like "low hanging fruit" or "bottom line" or "proactive" or "thinking outside the box." And every time one of these comes up during the meeting, you fill in the box until, at a certain point, you jump up and shout "Bingo!" And then, of course, you update your resumé.

Among my favorite terms are "paradigm shift" and "age of transition." We always seem to be just on the cusp of a paradigm shift – a fundamental change in the very ethos of our society – "ethos" being another of those buzz words – and in any year you will find books and articles describing this age – any age – as the turning point between past and future. *Every* age seems to be the age of transition, and we always seem to be on the verge of a new age.

I'm always bemused by the idea that we're in an "age of transition." One of my favorite quotes is what Adam is supposed to have said to Eve, as they left the Garden: "My dear, we're living in an Age of Transition."

Truth is, there's so much going on in our world today that the term seems justified. Look on almost any front, and you get the impression that what happens these next few months and years will have implications for generations to come – or for all humankind. Just thinking about the issues before us is daunting, and very sobering if not downright scary.

When we think about climate change, the world's scientists warn that we've just about arrived at that tipping point where nothing we do can any longer reverse the damage we've done to the planet – even as the deniers still deny and the world's governments most ignore. When we think about the nuclear deal with Iran, it's hard to feel, as we struggle with figuring out the best way to respond, that any

solution is really a good one, but it's easy to feel that this is one of those definitional issues that truly marks an age of transition. We think about the challenges of ISIS and extreme religious fundamentalism generally, and what seems like an epochal, unbridgeable divide between medievalism and modernity, and sure, this is an age of transition – living as we are in the turning point between BC and AC – Before the Caliphate and After the Caliphate. We look at Israel, at 67 old enough to receive Social Security but feeling more insecure than ever, and wonder how Israel can survive the crushing forces around her. I certainly worry, with a daughter and grandchildren living in Jerusalem, and worry about the internal forces that some say will do a better job of tearing Israel apart than any enemies from the outside. Add to the mix the fragility of our global economy, the unprecedented surge of refugees in so many countries; the mutant viruses that always seem a step ahead of our medicine and so much else, and it's no wonder that those who preach the End Times are filling their churches by the millions. If this is an Age of Transition, we have to wonder what will happen to us on the other side of the transition we're in.

We Jews have a long history of facing transitions – transitions that threatened our very existence; transitions that were seen in messianic terms when time itself seemed to be coming to an end; transitions that in some cases actually led messianic figures to emerge as the only hope for Judaism or humanity to be saved. Let's take a quick survey of a few of these – the Jewish ages of transition – and see what resulted.

Our very foundation as a people came through a revolutionary transition – from slavery to freedom; to being forged as a people while standing together at Sinai. We were destroyed by the great empires of Assyria and Babylonia – the end of the world must surely have seemed at hand – but by a seeming miracle survived to build a new Temple, and recreate Judaism for a new era. Rome destroyed our Second Temple – a time of apocalypse and the end of biblical Judaism, but despite the loss of Temple and priesthood and worship through sacrifices, a revolutionary generation was able to recreate Judaism – and Christianity, for that matter – into durable faiths that served and inspired until generations. We went through agonizing expulsions in Europe but found safe havens and golden ages when we least expected them. The Holocaust was the most brutal of all ages of transition, but it was a transition that led to the State of Israel – now the largest Jewish community the world has ever seen, and also about the most diverse and creative in every field of human endeavor.

All well and good, but the question remains: How are we to cope when the challenges we face are so many, and so frightening? Entering these High Holy Days and this New Year, what should be our mindset, as we yearn for a better future?

One approach – quite a reasonable one, actually – would be to withdraw from the world, and just focus on ourselves. I don't mean hedonistically, either – just to realize that we might not be able to change the world, but we might be able to change our own attitudes. There is actually some support for this in Judaism, as in the story told of a great Hasidic rabbi, known as the Chafetz Chayim. He was asked, in his old age, whether he had achieved in his long life all that he had set out to do.

“When I was young,” he replied, “I thought I could change the world. As time passed I realized that this would be impossible, but I thought I could at least change my country. Later I saw that I could not even change my village, but I finally learned that, with much effort, I could effect some changes in myself.”

The story speaks to me because it teaches that no matter what challenges us in life – whether globally or personally – we have a choice to make, and that choice is how we respond, and the attitude we bring to bear.

Judaism's response is not fatalism, but optimism, not as a platitude but as a whole approach to life. “Therefore choose life,” we read in Torah, “that you may live and be blessed.” “Therefore choose life,” as in the Jewish law that if a funeral procession and a wedding procession arrive at the intersection at the same time, it is the wedding procession that takes precedence.

Judaism is known for its optimism even in the midst of a pessimistic situation, as in the story of the Jewish optimist and the Jewish pessimist who were sitting around talking. The Jewish pessimist turns to the Jewish optimist and says: “Oy, things can't get any worse for our people.” The Jewish optimist turns to the Jewish pessimist, smiles, and says: “Sure it can!” That's Jewish optimism.

But Judaism is not just about principle, it is also about action. Passivity, even with the sunniest optimism one can imagine, is never enough. Even more than attitude, Judaism teaches us that the better future we dream of is in our hands – not something magically bestowed by God. “Justice, justice shall you pursue,” we are taught, and the Torah outlines a whole catalogue of what it takes to create a just society.

I believe strongly that optimism and activism for social justice go hand in hand. Take the environment, probably the single greatest challenge we humans face in this Age of Transition. Those of us who care deeply about Earth's future can bemoan the future. It's all too easy to be cynical, or even dismissive. But how wonderful it would be to use Rosh Hashanah – after all, the day for repentance and turning in new directions – to become more active and energized toward improving our world.

I am a realist and no Pollyanna, but believe that the road to a better future – globally and personally – is in our hands. Theodore Herzl, the political father of Zionism who was ridiculed when he first dreamed about a Jewish state, said “If you will it, it is no dream.” Fifty years later Israel was real; fifty years after that and Israel has become about the most creative, socially and technologically advanced country on Earth. Our Jewish community in North America is the most educated, freest, productive and wealthiest the world has ever known. We must not let ourselves succumb to the prejudices and intolerance of the age; even in the face – precisely in the face – of rising anti-Semitism and fundamentalism and xenophobia here and abroad. We must hold to our faith, to our values, to our moral compass, to our optimism that by living lives of righteousness, we can bring about change. Whatever your goal, if you will it, it is no dream.