

They Say it's Your Birthday (April 2006)

There used to be a time when the thought of an impending birthday would grasp me in its claws of smothering anticipation. I would see it on the horizon, set it as a point of focus around which all other events would pale in comparison. Nothing could challenge its supremacy (save maybe Opening Day for the Tigers). It was a day devoted to me. Just me.

Of course, that was a long time ago. With age came perspective. Birthdays are no longer such a big deal, and not because there are fewer of them in the future than in the past. It's just that I now am able to see more of the whole picture. The span of life. And the realization that there are more important things in the world than me.

I wonder if children living in Darfur ever celebrate birthdays?

This is the month of our freedom. This is the month we sit down with our loved ones and proclaim "Let all who are hungry come and eat...This year we are slaves, next year we will be free." Even more, we believe it. Pesach has that kind of magic. It reminds us of who we are and why we exist as a people. Passover is the birthday of the Jewish people.

But no sooner than the last guests have gone home and the dessert plates are put into the dishwasher, we somehow slip back into our mundane lives of self-absorption. The problems of the world—so easily identified in our seder talk—are put away with the haggadahs into the basements of our souls. "Next Year In Jerusalem" sadly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because we know that next year will be no different than last.

And we will have no one to blame but ourselves.

You see our ancestors put in that phrase at the end of the seder because they could not control their fates. Their lives were invariably at the mercy of others. But we no longer need a messiah to bring us to the promised land. Gone are the days when self-determination was nothing more than a dream. We can do—as Jews—anything we want. We can go to Jerusalem anytime we want. We can walk down the street with kippot on our heads. We can throw birthday parties

for our kids in the country clubs from which our grandparents were forbidden. Because now we are free. Alas we are also slaves to ourselves.

I wonder if we use our freedom for the reasons God intended it?

These thoughts have filled my mind as I turned 56 this past month. This year's birthday came and went with little fanfare. I was sick with my annual late-winter cold, so we stayed home and ordered in. My family gave me a gift certificate. They know me well. Yet our subdued observance also awakened memories of what it used to be like when March 21st would roll around. How I would labor through a whole day of school, then have to wait until Dad got home, before I could open my long-awaited presents. I now know that what I found so captivating about those anxiously expected presents was that they represented a delightful albeit temporary reprieve from my juvenile state of powerlessness. But over the years the idea of gifts—all good intentions notwithstanding—has lost much of its appeal; after all, if I really want it I can just go out and buy it.

I wonder if the grown-ups of Darfur—that is those who live long enough to be grown-ups—will ever know this kind of freedom and power?

What possible reasons can we find for not demanding that the world put a stop to the genocide in Darfur? How do we justify standing quietly, silently by? And what's the point of marking birthdays without the understanding that "growing up" is a lesson in learning what I'm supposed to do with my life in the service of others (and not the other way around)?

I wonder if, by the time I celebrate my last birthday, I will have shared all the gifts I have to give?