

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow and the Choices We Make

A movie that came out earlier this summer called “Yesterday” was the perfect summer movie – light and not too heavy. Being a die-hard Beatles fan, I saw it and loved it. The premise was that during a worldwide blackout of a few seconds, memory of the Beatles and all references to them and their music were wiped out of the memory bank of the entire world – including all computers and human beings. A Google search of the word Beatles showed a picture and article about the insect. A Google search of “John, Paul, George and Ringo” came up with information about Pope John Paul. No one had any knowledge or recollection of them, except for one struggling musician who somehow was not subjected to the massive universal memory loss. About to give up on a lackluster mediocre music career, when he realizes that he alone is privy to access the music catalogue of the Fab Four he goes on to record and perform the Beatles music as if it was his own. In the process he becomes an international superstar performing before adoring, packed, sold-out crowds.

While initially pleased with the adulation, our superstar becomes increasingly disillusioned with his fame and wealth and is troubled to be parlaying music he knows he has not composed as his own. His discomfort stems from knowing that he is inauthentic and a fraud. The movie ends -- here comes a spoiler alert – with an obvious and not so subtle or unexpected finale: His conscience begins to bother him and he can no longer maintain the masquerade of being someone other than himself.

Like the movie “Yesterday”, the *Aseret Y'mei Teshuva*, ten days of repentance remind us that at some point, we all must “face the music”, and that ultimately we each must face the truth of who we are and who we are not.

The Rosh Hashana Shaharit service concludes with a rousing rendition not of “Yesterday”, but of “*Hayom*” – which means, “today.” In reiterating the refrain *Hayom, today*, at the beginning of each line, the prayer affirms the power of today and emphasizes the importance of being in the moment, of not delaying or postponing what we need to do.

The theme and prayers of Rosh Hashana compel us to reflect upon where we are in life today and who we should aspire to become. The recitation of God’s attributes is to teach us, human beings created in God’s image, the qualities we should strive to emulate. We set aside this time to come together on this Day of Judgment as a community and as individuals to think about our shortcomings. The introspection is intended to help us return to our essence, our ideals and principles and give us the resolve, determination and means to make the sometimes difficult and even painful changes we need to make.

And so on this day let us consider -- What are we going to do with the opportunity presented to us with a new day, with the clean slate we are granted on the new year?

As I mentioned yesterday, Rosh Hashanah is an anniversary – the 5,780th anniversary of the creation of the world, the beginning of humanity.

While every year is obviously filled with anniversaries, I couldn't help but notice that it seems that this year had a significant number of golden anniversaries. Looking at newspapers and special edition magazines we are reminded that a lot happened fifty years ago. From Woodstock to Neil Armstrong setting foot on the moon, to the Stonewall riots, as well as the release of Abbey Road, the last album the Beatles recorded together, many of us recall 1969 as an eventful, even seminal year. For the younger among us, 2019 is the 30th anniversary of the movie "When Harry Met Sally." The previous year, 2018 was also filled with significant 50th anniversaries, including the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and I am sure we will not lack for things to commemorate next year, or the year after as well.

An article in the *New York Times* by Alyson Kreuger entitled "It's the Anniversary of Everything" questions why we are so fascinated and keep looking back on events that took place 50 years ago. She asks, "Just what is the point of marking (these golden anniversaries)? Is doing so essential for society's psychological well-being?" She cites the work of University of Massachusetts professor William Johnston who wrote a book about anniversaries. He commented that we arbitrarily pay special attention to multiples of five and suggests that anniversaries provide the kind of experience of regularity across a lifetime that the weekly cycle supplies in daily life. They offer us the chance to look back nostalgically on the past and see how far we have come, where we are today in relation to where we were yesterday, while dreaming and speculating about where we will be tomorrow.

I am reminded of the story of a husband and wife who went out to celebrate a wedding anniversary. As they were driving home, the wife said to her husband, "What has happened to us over the years? Do you remember when we first started dating, and were first married, how we would get into the car and snuggle up to each other? Now look at how far apart we're sitting from each other." The husband responded by pointing to the steering wheel and said, "I haven't moved."

Indeed, anniversaries give us a chance to pause and think about how far and in what direction we have moved.

On the anniversary we celebrate today, Rosh Hashana, we, like the couple driving together pause and ponder how distant and alienated we have become -- from our origins, our upbringing, our values, our traditions, our heritage, our ideals, our dreams of long ago, as well as from God and our loved ones.

As we turn our attention from the yesterdays that have passed, and face *hayom*, today, which is the first day of the rest of our lives, these *Aseret Ymei Teshuva*, culminating on Yom Kippur offer us the chance not just to look back, but to look forward. The process of teshuvah and the introspection that accompanies it allow us to start over again, to begin anew, and to release us from being captive to our past. Our prayers call upon us to consider what we will do and what will we make of this gift of a new beginning.

What insights and wisdom can our tradition offer to help us deal with these existential issues pertaining to life?

The Rosh Hashana prayers echo Jewish teachings, especially those found in the Book of Deuteronomy which repeatedly remind us that life is a series of choices and that we are free to choose what we make of the hand that is dealt us.

Holocaust survivor and psychologist Edith Eva Eger exemplifies this approach and philosophy. She wrote an inspiring book chronicling her experiences in Auschwitz, which shares how she dealt with and overcame the horror she experienced in the death camp. She went on to become a highly sought-after lecturer and psychologist helping people overcome trauma with her message of hope and endurance.

Rather than ask, “why me?” when something terrible happens to us, she suggests a more appropriate response is, “what now?” meaning to focus instead on how to respond to whatever has transpired. She contends that we can be fixated and immobilized, or we can take control of our lives by moving on and not allowing ourselves to be trapped indefinitely by forces beyond our control.

She cites the work of another Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankl who said that everything can be taken from a person except for one thing -- the freedom to choose one’s attitude towards his or her circumstances.

Eger had an older sister who was sassy, well groomed, well dressed and who had always prided herself on her good looks. Shortly after they arrived at Auschwitz, their hair was cut and they were given the grey uniforms they wore the duration of their time in the concentration camp, her sister asks her how she looks. At that moment, Eger realized that life is all about choices, which is why she called her memoir, “The Choice.” She concluded that we have the power to choose how we look at what happens to us. With this in mind, she tells her sister that she had never noticed before how beautiful her eyes are, because her face had always been covered by so much hair. She deduced that we can either pay attention to what we still have and appreciate it, or mourn what we have lost.

Somehow she managed to find the inner strength to overcome imprisonment, dehumanization, loss of her family, torture, and starvation. Rather than be bitter she chose not to allow what had been done to her to define her. She writes, "We can choose what the horror teaches us. (We can) become bitter in our grief and fear.... or hold on to the childlike innocent, lively, curious part of us."

She explains that this is the difference between being a victim and wallowing in victimhood. We are victims when others act upon us and do something to us. Victimhood though is a choice we make to carry our burden and to let it become a defining characteristic of our identity. She contends that we decide how to frame and understand things that happen to us. What we decide determines the kind of people we will be. The key to living a fulfilling life is to recognize that we have the power to choose how to respond to the challenges we face.

Contrary to the advice of so many therapists these days who advocate that if there is someone causing pain or distress in your life, you just avoid the situation and eliminate that person from your life, she explains that this is not a viable or healthy option. We benefit most when we confront and deal with the source of our pain rather than avoid it. Judaism encourages us not to avoid those we have hurt, or who have hurt us, but to openly, honestly and bravely confront what troubles us, even if and when it is painful and difficult.

Seeking and granting forgiveness, though not easy, releases pent up tension as it eases the weight of the burdens we carry and can be tremendously liberating.

She is invited to speak at a conference in Germany and finds herself in Hitler's lair, Eagle's Nest and even sleeps in the bed that Goering had slept in. Initially filled with trepidation and reluctant to go, her trip there is what allows her to overcome her past and the inner guilt she carried over her responsibility for her mother's death in Auschwitz.

Howard Zinn, in his essay "The Optimism of Uncertainty" similar to the advice of Eger and Frankl, writes that the key to happiness has to do with one's perspective. We can focus on the worst in humanity and our lives, allowing ourselves to be paralyzed, or we can choose to pay attention to the good, to those who behave magnanimously, to stories of compassion, courage, and kindness. The perspective we choose, whether it be one of despair or hope, determines how we will behave. In other words, how we react determines how we act, which in turn determines the direction and path our life will take.

I would only add that expectations also play a role. Expecting little from others lessens the likelihood of disappointment.

He writes, "To be hopeful in bad times is ... (to recognize) that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to

emphasize in this complex history will determine (how we live) our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places when people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

Our rabbis comment on yesterday’s Torah reading that when Hagar discovers the water to give to her son when they are in the desert, it was there all along. God merely helped her see what was there by opening her eyes.

Almost as difficult as changing ourselves and choosing how we view things is to recognize and accept when others are trying to change, or may have actually changed.

One of the shortcomings of the prophet Jonah, whose story is recounted on Yom Kippur afternoon, is that he is unable to see that the people of Nineveh have abandoned their sinful ways and are truly repentant. Although he is a prophet, Jonah is trapped in his preconceived notions and only sees the people as the sinners they once were. The seer sees only their past and is incapable of recognizing that they have changed. In contrast to the prophet, all is known by God, a loving God who accepts us and perceives our underlying worth and essence, whether we are aware of it ourselves or not. We, like God, must be on the lookout and then be ready, willing and able to accept loved ones when they change and amend their ways.

At this time of year, we are especially conscious of our frailties and vulnerabilities. As a psychologist working with many patients Eger learned that we all hunger for approval, attention and affection, but we do not always get it. She likens the ups and downs of life, the successes and the disappointments, the strands we experience to the braids of challah or of a havdalah candle.

Each and every one of us at different points in our lives has had our share of struggles and challenges. We each have regrets, fears, grief and sorrows, failure, disappointments, shortcomings and loss. At some point we may experience tragedy or difficulty caused by circumstances over which we have no control. It is not a reflection of our self-worth, but comes with being alive. Some may harbor feelings so private and stored away so deep that we keep them to ourselves, locked away in a place not accessible to anyone.

With all the talk about teshuva and change at this season, the message I want to share with you today is that sometimes it is not as much about changing ourselves, as it is about changing our perspective and outlook.

In the words of Deuteronomy, “*uvecharta behayim*: Choose life.” It also means choose how to live your life. In the spirit of recognizing how critical shaping our outlook on life is, I want to conclude with an obituary I read and clipped and saved from *The Washington Post* about two

years ago about a woman who probably had her share of highs and lows, but who obviously knew how to live a life filled with joy.

The obituary in the Post reads as follows: “No tsuris. No plotzing for us. Our mentsch of a Mom, Grandma, and Great Grandma said goodbye to her mishpacha on September 30, 2017 at the age of 92. Oy viz meir? No. Helene had a full life, and was surrounded by family til the end. Kvetch? No way. Helene kvelled over her family and had nachas from all of us. With a maven’s perspective, she bemoaned the mishegoss of the current state of affairs in the US and world....” Skipping to the end it concludes: “Mazal tov on a great life. Shluf gezunt (sleep well) and keep your wits about you.”

What a wonderful attitude, and what a wonderful way to go.

The cycle of teshuvah (repentance) that is the underlying theme and subtext of the High Holidays offers us the possibility of cleansing us of our previous sins, promising we can begin the new year with a clean slate. But unlike the memory loss in the movie Yesterday, our slates are never fully wiped clean. A new beginning is in many ways, a continuation of yesterday, and of what preceded it.

Rabbi Natan of Nemirov said, “Know and believe that every day, at any time, at any moment, you can renew yourself and become a brand new being.” The key to unlocking infinite possibilities is how we view and frame our circumstances. It can be transformative and give us the will and the hope necessary to face tomorrow.

That is why teshuvah means not just repentance. It actually means return. On Rosh Hashana we seek to return – return to wholeness, and wholesomeness, to repair relationships that have been broken, to turn and return to our loved ones.

The choice of what happens to us may not always be in our hands or made by us. But the choice of how we view life and what we do with it is.

May the clarion call of this season help us each choose wisely.

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If you or someone you know and care about is in need of healing from trauma or abuse, you may consider recommending or seeking counselling. A free confidential resource in the DC area for anyone who is suffering from trauma, abuse or power-based violence is JCADA. Jcada.org or their helpline is 877-88-JCADA

