D’rash Erev Rosh Hashanah 1, Sept 29, 2019

Elke Martin

This past year I have struggled a bit with my days in retirement. While I clearly enjoy living without an alarm clock, I have felt somewhat aimless. Don’t get me wrong, I do quite a few things and am involved in various groups and causes. People ask me to do stuff because they know I get things done but the focus and drive that I have known for most of my work life has somehow diminished.

So this seems to be the perfect time to look for a new goal, a cause, a something I can wrap my head around and sink my teeth into. Because on ***Rosh Hashanah*** and the following nine days we are challenged to ask ourselves what our intention might be for the coming year.

One wouldn’t think this is too difficult a task in our time when so many things are wrong with the world and this country. There are multiple areas where volunteers are needed if we want to turn the mood in this country around and get back to more hopeful days.

When some of us at Bet Mishpachah started to think about these HHD we were wondering if there was a theme running through these days of Awe, beyond the theme that is given to each day already. Wherever each of us was in our personal journey all of us agreed that our grim outlook, our fears flamed by the rhetoric of the current administration and a president who shall not be named can be subsumed under the question, ***Ayeka*** – where are you? It’s the question God asked Abraham and we know his famous response ***Hineini*** – I am here.

In the coming days you will hear a variation on ***Ayeka*** from each of us who will stand where I stand now. I decided to focus on self-care. You see, we are all working our way through questions of what to do and where to be engaged in order to respond to ***Ayeka*** but not all of us will think of taking care of ourselves as an important aspect. Yet that is important, and it has far-reaching consequences. Just think of the often-cited image of the passengers in an airplane who are told that in case of reduced air pressure oxygen masks will fall from the ceiling. PUT YOUR OWN MASK ON FIRST BEFORE HELPING SOMEONE ELSE.

Recently, I attended an event sponsored by the Jewish Veg organization. I had not been aware that such a group even existed. I have long been interested in healthy eating and have always considered it my responsibility to keep my body in as good a shape as I can – one of the few things I can actually control. But talking to the Jewish Veg people brought my understanding to a new level. They say, protecting our health isn’t just a good idea – it’s a Jewish value.

It says in Genesis chapter 1 verse 29 “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food”. A little further along, in chapter 2 God invites us in verse 16 to eat of every tree of the garden except for the tree of knowledge.

Maimonides himself wrote:

"Maintaining a healthy and sound body is among the ways of G-d - for one cannot understand or have knowledge of the Creator if one is ill. Therefore one must avoid that which harms the body and accustom oneself to that which is helpful and helps the body.”

Given this mandate, reducing or eliminating the consumption of animal products can be considered a Jewish value for health reasons alone.

After all, study after study has shown us that the consumption of animal products has been linked to higher rates of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, stroke – the list goes on and on.

It is also said that we should honor and protect the animals around us. ***Tsa'ar ba’alei chaim***, the prohibition on causing animals pain, is one of the most beautiful teachings in Judaism. Our Jewish sacred texts strongly emphasize compassion for animals, and strongly oppose the infliction of suffering on another living creature. ***Tsa'ar ba'alei chaim*** is such an important idea in Judaism that Joseph H. Hertz, the chief rabbi of Great Britain from 1913-1946, said, "It is one of the glories of Judaism that, thousands of years before anyone else, it so fully recognized our duties to (animals)."

Today that is called vegan lifestyle. As I study nutrition, I have come across a surprising little sentence: the best way an individual can protect the earth is by eating a vegan diet. Not only do you take care of your body the best way possible you also vote with your dollars when in the supermarket. Each time you buy a, say, bag of beans instead of some piece of meat you tell the meat market that you are not supporting their products, you do not approve of their cruel and disrespectful ways.

Back to the meeting of the Jewish Veg organization, where I met Dr. Alex Hershaft. He holds a doctorate in environmental chemistry. He describes the horror he experienced when he, as an industrial plant inspector in the 1950s, visited and examined a slaughterhouse. You see, he was a survivor of the Holocaust. As he rounded the facility to take a break re stumbled upon a pile of animal carcasses, a pile of hooves, a pile of heads.

Instantly, he said, he made the connection between the images he held in his mind of the death camps and of what he saw now before his eyes. Isaac Barshevis Singer’s saying came to mind, “To the animals all men are Nazis.” We were startled and shocked. He apologized to us for the harsh comparison but for him those images of what he had encountered behind the slaughterhouse were such a stark reminder of the total disrespect of life that he could never consider eating meat after this incident.

If we take the time to follow and understand what some have made their lives’ purpose – to describe and decipher what goes on in our bodies after we eat a meal - if we actually take the time to learn what our body has to do in order to deal with a piece of nourishment as it traverses the different stages of digestion you cannot help but marvel at the intricacies of all the many processes, one triggered by the other and intended to keep this or that function going.

When you look at this in detail you may also be shocked into an awareness of distinguishing between what is necessary to keep your body machine functioning and what is deemed pleasurable – largely a cultural concept.

What does that have to do with us as Jews? What does it have to do with ***Ayeka***? It is what Rabbi Dunya Ruttenberg describes as “the thinner-thighs-in-six-weeks approach to religion, which is not uniquely American to be sure, but matching perfectly the zeitgeist of instant gratification that reigns today.” Instead you may want to experience some instances of a different revelation, a new dining experience when a friend presents a plant-based dinner or a shocking image like Dr. Alex that will twist your head and change your perspective.

But of course, thinking of food and nourishment is so much bigger than you – it brings you to see and consider mechanisms that keep the world, our environment, life itself going.

Lately, in discussions of climate change, cries of eating habits of the so-called first world have been heard louder and louder. Really? My decision of whether a steak or chickpeas for dinner can take on such a monumental dimension? Well, you would express support for the environment if you consumed the grain instead of having the grain fed to the animals and then you consume the animal, a 12-fold increase in use of energy. Not to mention the difference in water use: it takes 37 gallons to produce 1 pound of beans and about 2,500 gallons to produce one pound of beef.

We learned that an ever-increasing amount of the Amazon rainforest is destroyed to make way for cattle pasture so that more beef patties can be produced and shipped halfway around the world for someone’s brief pleasure that can have an unnoticed consequence of a health problem detected years later when it is nearly impossible to make the connection between these two events.

One of the major themes running through the High Holy Days is ***teshuva***, the mandate of returning. We could understand this as an encouragement to return to the original invitation when God told us to use every seed-bearing plant and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit for food.

The Jewish mandate of ***bal tashchit***, or thou shalt not destroy, comes from Deuteronomy chapter 20. The verses 19 and 20 explicitly forbid the chopping down of fruit trees in a wartime siege. The waste associated with meat production could be considered a blatant violation of ***bal tashchit***. As a planet, we are using about 8 times more land for growing feed for animals than we are growing food for humans.

I urge you not to underestimate the impact of your actions. Just like with any other change we have worked on during our lifetimes – and have wondered at times if it was worth it - it takes many people and it takes time but it all starts with an awareness of how the details interact with each other and what our role in this constant exchange is. As so often, it comes down to the question – are you part of the problem or are you part of the solution?

I leave you with the words of two rabbis.

David Wolpe says, “Kashrut is not vegetarianism. But kashrut is a reminder of Judaism’s concern with animal suffering… To make those in our power suffer, whether people or animal, is to darken our own soul… our first responsibility is to be kind.”

And Rabbi Rami Shapiro calls mindful eating a practice designed to enhance your capacity for compassion.

How’s that for an intention for the New Year?

May we all be inscribed for a good and nourishing New Year!

Shanah Tovah!