

RABBI'S RESPONSA

Shalom L'Kulam (Peace Everyone),

I'm writing this one week before Rosh Hashanah and you're reading it shortly after Sukkot is over. In my personal life, my kids are just about to attend their first day of the new school year (my daughter her first day of kindergarten, no less).

In my professional life, there are so many details that require my attention and sermons to write and prospective members with whom to meet and the pace is just as exhausting as the stakes are high. In my spiritual life, I am reviewing my inner and outer self over the last year and taking stock of who I've been and who I think I could yet become. And, all of this looms with concrete deadlines immediately in my future.

But, now that you're reading it, you know that somewhere, I sit with all of the first paragraph as part of my history. All the activity and concern I felt a month ago have given way to the knowledge that some of it was a success, some of it might not have been but now, it's passed. If I knew then what I know now, I suppose I would not have had to invest so much emotional energy alongside the physical effort. And now, undoubtedly like you, I'm looking ahead to the next uncertainty.

There is a lot of uncertainty around us these days. There are important elections scheduled, policies pending, climate changing and cultures shifting. But, here's what I know: regardless of how my kids fare that first day of school and no matter how the sermons are received or what the outcome of the elections, the sun will continue to rise and we will continue to live our lives. We will still see stunning examples of humanity and acts of kindness and we will still look to our scientists to apply the miracle of human creativity to the challenges all around us. Judaism insists that we focus on the present and live it with great optimism about the future.

There is a Mishnah (a 3rd century rabbinic text from the oral tradition) that warns us not to be like "the servant who serves the Master just to get a reward" (Avot 1:3). In other words, we should not expect that our efforts will reward us with everything we think we deserve. Instead, "be like the servant who serves the Master not on condition of receiving a reward." Shoot for the moon and, rather than looking around to consider your condition as a result of your efforts, continue to work for your goals.

That is not to say we cannot or should not celebrate our successes and pleasures. Just the opposite, that's what Shabbat is for. But, when Sunday morning comes around and it's time to reenter the world of "need," we summon our optimism and we get back to work. And, then, when the fruit of our labor yields its rewards, it is still not time to rest on our laurels. Instead, as the Midrashic collection called Avot D'Rabbi Natan teaches, "If you are planting a tree and the messiah comes, finish planting the tree, then go meet the messiah." That is to say, the work is never done. Once you achieve what you hoped, it is time to build for the next generation and "pay it forward."

The last point I'll share is that the same book of Mishnah teaches us that one mitzvah will lead to another mitzvah just as one mis-deed will increase the likelihood of another. It is the same with optimism. It breeds optimism in those around us and, if we surround ourselves with those who are struggling with despondency, we need to be awfully careful not to be pulled down with them.

May this new year, 5779, present you the opportunity and the strength to live a life focused on what is right, the unwavering optimism about what is possible and the blessing to enjoy it; and may those around you follow your lead – thereby increasing the presence of goodness in this world.