

## Rosh HaShanah 5780

### Taking Back Control of Our Lives

Today we usher in both a New Year and a new decade: the Hebrew 80s; the 5780s to be more exact. And in a few months we'll also start a new secular decade beginning with the year 2020.

The beginning of a new decade typically prompts a slew of highlights of the past ten years. There will be lists of the best and worst of the past decade's movies, books, and songs and lists of the top news stories and events.

Of course, the whole enterprise is rather arbitrary. Why should the end or beginning of a decade be a momentous occasion? Indeed, our Jewish tradition is to reflect on our important personal experiences throughout the year and especially on Rosh HaShanah. Alerted by the plaintive blasts from the shofar, charmed by the sweet and tart treat of apples and honey, warmed by the embrace of old friends and the tender kisses from loved ones as we wish each other "*Gut Yontif*," we instinctively find ourselves moved to reflection.

We give ourselves permission to stop the relentless push forward in order to pause and consider the year gone by. Rosh HaShanah is our time-honored *mitzvah* to honor time and, yes, to be awed, wowed, enchanted and even intimidated by time's elusive and irrepressible momentum.

We recall notable events; emotions and details of precious joys, as well as the times of anguish, worry and stress. We replay scenes in our mind's eye and like a movie editor pouring over scenes and takes, we re-examine the "what ifs," the "could haves and should haves," the triumphs and regrets, and we hope to squeeze from them lessons: lessons that may reveal answers; answers that intrigue and beguile and challenge us. Lessons and answers that remind us that we are forever changing: changing by growing, learning, forgetting, struggling, striving and acknowledging that we are simply imperfect works in progress. Yes, this is our time to recall the significant moments and do our best to protect them as memories or at least to glean what we can from them before they, like so many of the others before them, dim and fade.

For some, the past year marks the time of the beginning of a loving relationship; perhaps even a marriage. For others, this past year marked the beginning of parenthood, or the expansion of parenthood, or the beginning of grandparenthood. Many of us are trying on the feel of being "empty nesters" for the first time. Some started new jobs, some went on grand adventures, some moved to new homes, and some took those first uneasy steps of retirement. And for many of us, this New Year will be the first without a certain loved one by our side.

And for just about all of us, we have discovered that we are once again having to redefine, redesign, and recreate our lives. Yes, that's a heavy task and often an intimidating challenge, but it's one that we can do because we have been doing it from the moment we gained conscious awareness of our surroundings. And that's the way it should be; asserting control and responsibility for our own lives. And that's the way it has always been---at least until now. Because now we have come to realize that we are a lot more vulnerable to manipulation than we ever thought possible.

Well beyond the crude art of propaganda or the insidious rewriting of historical accounts by oppressive governments, the modern manipulators have the tools and the knowhow to get inside our heads. Inside our heads?

How is this possible? In his tremendously influential book, Thinking: Fast and Slow, Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman reveals the methodology of the manipulators. It hinges on the two cognitive systems we use as we think; he calls them System 1 and System 2.

System 1 is that essential flow that dominates our life. It is lightning fast, intuitive, and associative. It is our life-saving reaction that notices immediately when the driver in the next lane is driving erratically.

It picks up quickly on patterns, steers us clear from danger, and guides us toward things that we like. In short, System 1 is our dominant go-to process for making decisions.

System 2 is the slower, deliberative and calculating part of the thinking process. It monitors and controls thoughts and actions suggested by System 1. It also takes up a great deal of energy and patience. System 2 often seems too hard and such a bother that we don't bother with the effort to calculate. Rather, we prefer to guess.

One quick example illustrates the different roles of System 1 and 2.

Consider the following question and answer as quickly as possible:

A bat and a ball cost \$1.10. The bat costs one dollar more than the ball.

How much does the ball cost?

The number that quickly comes to mind is 10 cents. The easy answer is intuitive, appealing and wrong. Do the math. If the ball costs 10 cents and the bat is a dollar more that would make the bat \$1.10 and the total \$1.20 not \$1.10. The correct answer is that the ball costs 5 cents and the bat costs \$1.05. ([Thinking](#) p.44ff).

Now don't feel bad if you guessed wrong. More than 50% of the students at Harvard, MIT, and Princeton gave the same intuitive and incorrect answer. (At less selective universities the rate was more than 80% wrong.)

Why are we so prone to making these quick and incorrect answers?

Researchers believe that it goes beyond intelligence. Rather, it is the degree to which a person is mentally engaged and is willing to spend the effort reasoning out the equation. Indeed, since System 2 requires us to consider all the details and then check our work, we're often too lazy to invest in it. Parents and teachers may warn their kids again and again to check their work before handing in the assignment or test, but countless students have been avoiding that advice from the beginning of civilization.

The dominance of System 1 causes us to rely on biases. Biases, in and of themselves, are not always problematic. As I mentioned earlier, we base a great deal of our thinking on pattern recognition. For instance, we don't read by sounding out words. Rather, we read by recognizing the patterns of words. A Chess Grandmaster has an extraordinary talent to compute complex variations, but he or she also bases a lot of those calculations by recognizing related patterns from previous games and practice sessions.

Humans can quickly associate different elements and anticipate probable results based on our experiences of common patterns.

Those patterns, associations, and expectations form biases which constantly help us with our moment to moment decisions. They also make us prone to manipulation.

How? Well, if someone or some organization has the ability to collect thousands, even millions, of bits of information about a person, then they may obtain the insight to trigger a predicted reaction. In other words, once someone knows your biases, they have an essential tool for manipulation.

So how do they collect all that information? No guess work is necessary.

We give it to them---for free. We give it to them thinking that we're the ones getting something for free! Free surfing on the web, free Facebook, free Twitter, free Snapchat, free directions, free searches all provide boatloads of information about who we are, where we are, where we go, what we buy, what we're interested in, what we read, what we watch, and who we know.

In the old days, advertisers paid to attract us to buy their products. Now, we are the products!

Yuval Harari sketches out the ramifications in his books, Homo Deus and 21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The harvesting of personal information helps to create an algorithm of our preferences. This is how Netflix or Amazon can recommend to you a movie or a show they predict that you will like. And it goes beyond just our role as consumers.

Harari writes: “Engineers are currently developing software that detect human emotions based on the movements of our eyes and facial muscles” (21 Lessons, p. 52). Such software will know what makes us laugh and what makes us sad and what just bored us. He calls the collectors of this information “Big Data” and predicts that as scientists gain a deeper understanding of the way humans make decisions, our own reliance on algorithms is likely to increase.

Already, doing simple math by long hand is all but replaced by the calculators on our phones. And what about driving? Okay, confession time: when you are driving to a place that’s just a little new, but well within your capability to navigate on your own, who still plugs in an address to Google Maps or Waze and lets the computer tell us how to go? ME! But then again, I’m sure you, too, have found yourself second guessing the computer and ignoring its advice. Oh, they hate that! You’ll get a quick beep and then a sharp rebuke: “Recalculating.”

Good! We need to keep them recalculating. Because as algorithms guide more and more of our decisions, the more they take over our lives.

Harari warns that left unchecked, AI (Artificial Intelligence) will move well beyond telling us what to watch and the best route to our destination.

Whenever a major corporation, manufacturer, our own government or even a foreign government wants to know all they can about us, the information is there for purchase or for the taking. Every click-bait impulse and every new purchase we make adds to our personal file. And the more they know, the better they will get at figuring out what triggers get us to react, or buy or even vote. Yes, this information can even be used to influence the way we vote. What was once a figment of science fiction imagination is now a reality.

In the good old days, elections were rigged by tampering with voting machines, misplacing ballot boxes and registering the deceased. Of course, that took a lot of effort and manpower. Now a few trolls can plant a story, twist some minds, and cause a viral avalanche that can bury a candidate.

Again, the reason we are susceptible to this manipulation is because we operate all too often in our System 1 method of thinking.

We rely too much on the snap and quick judgement. We know what we like and what we don't like, and we want to have those biases reinforced. After a while, we don't even want to read news from sources, reporters and networks that present a different point of view. We are angered to hear challenges to our world view.

And then, if we are not careful, we find ourselves in smaller and smaller circles: tight groups of the like-minded whose members walk on eggshells lest one violate the accepted group-think.

But we can counteract this group-think. We can overcome the manipulation from Big Data. All it requires is for us to reclaim our own System 2, our deeper, more reflective, more contemplative form of thinking. Indeed, our decision to stay home from work and school to come to this Rosh HaShanah service is a radical act of self-assertion. Today, we decided to take the time in order to think deeply, to pray and meditate and remember and reflect. The High Holy Days are a declaration of our intellectual and spiritual autonomy. This is our time to defrag and reboot our mind and soul and reclaim the power over our own lives.

Now, just a friendly reminder: we can do this more than just on the High Holy Days of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur.

Yes, we can exercise this freedom to unplug from the system and reconnect with our faith and heritage throughout the year. Imagine if at least once a week, say on Shabbat, or at least on a part of Shabbat, we turned off the data and chose to live only in the here and now. Instead of Facebook or Twitter, we'd go and see real people and interact. Instead of being outraged by another inflammatory blog, we'd be with friends, family and community. Instead of dumping data into the algorithm of a corporation, we'd treat ourselves to spiritual, intellectual and social experiences.

At the heart of Judaism is the concept that all humanity is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Divine. It is an assertion that every human life has meaning, significance and purpose. The concept of *b'tzelem Elohim* reflects the conviction that God has granted us the power to choose, to learn, and to evolve. And it is a declaration that our freedom of thought and free will are sacred rights that need to be protected.

Over the last ten years, we have witnessed massive data leaks, we have seen internet-commerce decimate local owned businesses and we learned that foreign governments can play with our elections. What will happen over the next ten years? What will our lives be like in 2030?

Of course it needs to be recognized that our lives are vastly improved because of AI. Artificial Intelligence will continue to make amazing advancements in medicine and other sciences. The advantages of AI are to be celebrated. But so is the dignity, freedom and intellectual and spiritual integrity of human life.

As we begin the new decades of 5780 and 2020, let us reclaim our humanity. Acts of study and reflection deepen our thought and increase our immunity from manipulation. Events when we gather with friends, family and neighbors break down the hard divisions imposed by political affiliations. And times of prayer can reaffirm our connectedness to the Eternal, as well as to our ancestral faith and heritage.

In short, just as our people have done for well over 3,000 years, we will find strength, security, wisdom and inspiration by coming together and celebrating our bonds of faith, family and community. It is here that we assert, teach and strengthen our deeper more thoughtful way of thinking. Jewish study and prayer has honed our collective System 2 for over 3,000 years. Goodness knows, we need it now more than ever.

Susan and I wish you and your loved ones a sweet year filled with God's blessings of good health, happiness and prosperity.

***L'Shanah Tovah teka-tay-vu ve-t'cha-tay-mu!***