

ROSH HASHANA EVE
September 24, 2014

I don't remember very much about the Second World War. And what I think I remember is certainly combined with courses I've taken in twentieth century American history.

But one thing I know I do remember. I had a number of older cousins who were draft age. I don't remember where and when they served. What I do remember is that when one of them had a furlough, they would come to visit us in New York City, and my parents would take these young boys to see the City.

And that list always included stage shows at the Paramount Theater, the Roxy or Radio City Music Hall. Another thing, which we did, was to go the tapings of radio shows. As with quiz shows on television today, many of these shows welcomed audiences.

At one particular show, they handed out index cards, and asked members of the audience to respond to a question, which the M.C. would ask. The question was: "What do you do when you are feeling low?" On her index card, my mother wrote her answer: "I would go out and buy a new hat."

The producers were so excited about my mom's answer, that they called her to the stage to ask her more questions about buying a new hat.

While this incident occurred in the 1940's, my mother's instinctive reaction was right on the mark.

In a recent study published in Psychology Today, it was demonstrated that shopping – buying something new – has the ability to increase the level of serotonin – the neurotransmitter chemical known as the “happiness drug.” Studies has shown that people who are depressed have serotonin levels that are only 2 to 3 on a scale of ten. Increasing the serotonin level immediately upgrades their mood.

I am not suggesting that everyone who is depressed go out on a shopping spree, only to be depressed again when the bills arrive. But what I am suggesting is that it is the **new** aspect, which stimulates our mood.

And of course, this Rosh Hashanah eve is the beginning of the New Year. So, according to the theory, our serotonin levels should increase immediately.

I. NEW YEARS IN JUDAISM

Now Judaism has several new years celebrations. I am not certain whether the rabbis of ancient day know much about serotonin, but they seemed to understand the notion that new things can buoy our spirits.

So much so that there are at least three New Year observances instituted by the rabbis of ancient day.

First, is the New Year for Trees – Tu BiShevat, the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat. This early spring holiday has become an opportunity to plant trees in Israel, but it has recently become an ecological holiday: a time to re-commit ourselves to the environment.

The re-birth of life in the Spring, after a dark and depressing winter, renews our spirit, re-commits us to the care of our earth. This deep Jewish understanding predates our recent discoveries related to global warming.

We celebrate this holiday by planting new trees. We ready ourselves for the blooming of the forsythia and crocuses and early tulips and other sure signs of the waning of the dark days of winter.

Yet, there is another New Year in the Jewish calendar. It is first of the month of Nisan – the biblical beginning of the year. Nisan is the month of Passover, and it is the commemoration of the re-birth of the Jewish people after our enslavement in Egypt.

As we all know, the essence of the Passover Seder, is the retelling of the exodus story – our liberation from the harsh environment under the Egyptian taskmasters.

Our exodus from Egypt is the essential Jewish experience. Each Friday evening, when we recite the Kiddush prayer over the wine, we are asked to “remember the exodus from Egypt.”

Passover asks that we bask in the newness of our hard-won freedom.

II. ROSH HASHANAH

And then, of course, the celebration of our New Year, Rosh Hashanah. To tell you the truth, we have a problem with Rosh Hashanah.

The specialness of the Rosh Hashanah holiday is both enhanced and blunted by the American traditions of new beginnings every fall. We are engulfed by the American tradition of schools beginning, concert seasons starting, all at the same time as the Jewish celebration of Rosh Hashanah.

The beginnings of the Fall Season in America also takes away from the specialness of the new year in Judaism. The new year in the fall is about new clothing, welcoming the change of seasons.

But for us Jews, the personal and spiritual nature of Rosh Hashanah needs to take center stage. It is the spiritual serotonin that needs to be the focus of our new year.

It is easy to get caught up in the advent of fall, with its beautiful colors, with the promises of new seasons and highlights.

We need to make certain that Rosh Hashanah brings with it a serotonin burst that will give us optimism and hope for our future and the future of our world.

Of course, we know that there is another new year. In January, Americans celebrate the **pagan** new year. The secular New York for many peoples includes a heavy dose of noise: noise makers, loud banging, and lots of cheering at the moment that the new year begins. Noise was supposed to chase away the evil spirits.

Think about the celebrations in Times Square in New York. I confess, I and a bunch of friends did go to that celebration only once in my life. I think I was 19, which should be the optimum age requirement.

I think I knew that night how evil spirits felt. I TOO wanted to get out of there!

But that is not our way. Jewish new year observances are about quiet contemplation. It is about evaluating our lives, our goals, our hopes.

But there is much more to Rosh Hashanah than serotonin. Rosh Hashanah is about starting over, of making new resolutions, of vowing to change the error of our ways.

Rosh Hashanah is about our own potentiality, about new possibilities. Rosh Hashanah is a gift to the Jewish people that we need to fully appreciate and participate in.

III. NOT EVERYBODY LIKES NEW THINGS

But there are countervailing forces operating. Not everybody likes new things. For them, anything new is destabilizing.

The most ubiquitous symptom of change for all of us is the speed with which electronics have moved. From just 25 years ago, when only a few people had cell phones and computers, we are living in a time when almost everyone has a computer.

When I was a rabbi in Miami almost 30 years ago, I received a mysterious message from my secretary. (We had secretaries then.) She wanted to know whether my car would be in the Temple parking lot between one o'clock in the afternoon, and four o'clock. I told her that it would be. Why do you want to know, I asked? She replied: I can't tell you.

When I went to my car that evening to drive home, I found a cell phone installed in my car. It was a big thing, and bolted down for security reasons. Frankly, I was embarrassed by the entire incident. A congregant, for whom I had performed a life cycle ceremony, wanted to thank me in a tangible way. He decided that every rabbi should have a car cell phone, and his rabbi should not be so lacking.

I got used to it, and really liked it after a while. In fact, I was titillated by the notion that I was in the *avant guard* (or so I thought) of the technology revolution.

Even 30 years later, there are many people who are sorely distressed by the rapid progress of technology. I hear that there are still some people who do not use computers, and do not own cell phones. (Of course, this is hard to believe if you travel on the subway!)

The new frightens them. And this is not only older people. It is true in the business world as well. Consider the case of Amazon.

Book publishers and bookstore owners are rightly very threatened by Amazon. For many people, the speed with which they can get any book is just wonderful. I once loved to browse in independent bookstores. Looking up and down the aisles of a well-stocked shop was pleasurable. But, if I wanted a book that was not on the shelves, it took more than two weeks to get it. And then they would send me a postcard to notify me.

Now I can order a book on my computer or cellphone on Amazon (any title) and get it the next day!

Publishers rail against Amazon. Amazon controls much of the book market. Book publishers do not wish to change from their gentlemanly way of doing business; the good old days. And small independent bookshops are going out of business. Life changes all the time, and so does business.

The new ways are different, and new things will always be destabilizing and fearful.

CONCLUSION

Yes, Judaism welcomes the new. And the new – the new year – gives us hope in the future. The new year dampens our depression, and stimulates our serotonin.

But the new is also destabilizing. Changing is not easy, but we need to embrace it and hold on tight.

Judaism teaches us balance, balancing the old with the new. Throughout our history, our essential endeavor has been adapting to new worlds.

The 2nd century law code The Mishnah, adapted the biblical laws to a world without a Temple in Jerusalem. The Gemara, the commentary on the Mishnah, adapted mishnaic law to new and different worlds. And so it has always been.

One of the glories of Judaism has been its ease in adapting to new worlds and new places.

Remember Wood Allen's movie "Midnight in Paris!" In every time, people were nostalgic about the generation before them. Those living in the Roaring Twenties looked with nostalgia at La Belle Epoque.

Was life really better in the shtetl of Eastern Europe? Was life really better 100 years ago when our grandparents and great grandparents came to these shores as immigrants?

The NEW year, Rosh Hashanah, should teach us the balance that life requires of us. Cherish the old, but embrace the new. And let our serotonin flow in the new year, making us joyful and glad

