

ROSH HASHANAH EVE
September 18, 2009

Who could have imagined, a year ago when we last met, what sort of a tumultuous year it would turn out to be.

There were many extraordinary and wonderful developments. Those of us who worked in the civil rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's, those of us who have been deeply concerned about civil rights for all Americans, were amply rewarded in November, when Barack Obama became president of the United States. The Cassandras among us were convinced that some sleight of hand, some legal maneuver would steal the election - again. Just to hear or say "President Obama" still sends shivers up my spine.

On a more personal level, each of us - as is always with the passage of time - has gained new family, enjoyed children and grandchildren, and yes, lost dear ones to illness, disease and old age. Planes crashed and violent storms snuffed out lives all too soon.

But most of these events were planned, predicted and normal in the course of events. No one, sitting at services a year ago could have predicted the unfolding economic drama which we both observed and are playing roles in. No one escaped the events of last fall and winter.

And yet, we are here, together again, welcoming another new year. For this, we all say a collective "Shehecheyanu."

OUR GOVERNMENT

Surrounding us all is the newly emerged role of the United States Government in our lives. Most of us really don't like to think about Washington affects us, and how much of what we do or don't do depends on Congress.

For many years, we heard the cry "What's good for General Motors is good for America," stressing the important role which the motor industry and corporate America play in our lives and in Washington. Little did we know then that the Government would have to bail out the motor industry and corporate America, including the banks.

Then, of course, we've heard accusations of "Communism" and "Socialism." I suspect that the people who were accusing have little understanding of what either one of these philosophies are all about. I am certain that what we are hearing are vestiges of the Cold War. Or perhaps of the McCarthy era. Calling someone a "Communist" was about the worst epithet that you could muster.

But more than anything else, this major recession gives lie to the notion that any individual can go it alone in our society. It gives lie to the "rugged individualism" which some ascribe as being the essence of American society. That notion of "rugged American individualism" stands at the heart of the resistance on the part of many people to gun control or to the idea that single medical practitioners taking care of adoring patients in at the heart of good medicine.

The rabbis of ancient day had a keener understanding of society and the human endeavor. They articulated the notion that every one stands before God as an

individual, and that he/she is responsible for one's own actions. The Calvinist idea of pre-destination and the seminal Christian understanding of original sin do not play any role in Jewish thinking. Our rabbis taught that each of us is responsible for choosing good and evil in our own lives. Individual responsibility to choose stands at the core of what it means to be Jewish.

That sense of individual responsibility is balanced by Judaism's understanding of "kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh." Everyone in the community is responsible for everyone else. This gave rise combined to Jewish welfare fund fundraising which in turn stimulated the American creation of the Community Chest and the United Way.

"Rugged individualism" in American is counterbalanced by "communal responsibility." The challenge is to keep the two human tendencies in a relationship that benefits everyone.

We need not be afraid of the idea "Government interference in our lives" because it is already there. What we need to worry about is an over-reliance on the government that will be so benign that individual responsibility vanishes with it.

The economic crisis that has forced the Government to step into fray in many new areas, has caused many of our most sacred institutions to stagger as well.

INSTITUTIONAL SELF-EVALUATION

This Recession has revealed much about America's corporate world, in some cases more than we want to know. The size of corporate executive bonuses had little to do with performance; rewards frequently had little to do with labor. Perhaps these corporations, with their secrets opened to public scrutiny, will exercise a greater sense of public responsibility.

The economic downturn has had a deep impact on our most sacred institutions, including universities, churches and synagogues.

Over the past several years, when philanthropy money was easy to come by, many institutions added staff and programs that often took them away from the essential focus of this being. Some of the institutions became bloated and so gargantuan that it was often difficult to remember why they were created.

For 18 years, I worked for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, now the Union for Reform Judaism. I held quite a number of different responsibilities during those years, including the directorship of its regional program of service to congregations.

The regional program was conceived in the 1950's, and even earlier, in which almost every large city had a UAHC regional office. When I was the director, we had 14 offices spread across the United States and Canada. Each office was a mini-version of the national staff, including educators, youth staff and the like. I left the Union more than 20 years ago. The structure then was approximately 40

years old. It was conceived at a time when there were no jet planes, when telephone service was minimal, compared to now, when computers did not exist in every home and office. It was a time when communication was, to our 2009 eyes, quite rudimentary.

The recession caused the Union to re-examine its 60 year old regional structure. Now, instead of 14 regional offices, there are four: New York, Atlanta, Chicago and San Francisco. Each office now has superior communication equipment and the necessary skill sets to make the equipment work. Tens of thousands of dollars have been saved, and the service is better and more timely.

Other institutions - universities, charities, churches and synagogues - need to be as bold! They need to look at themselves with a new clear eye. Just because they did something one way for scores of years does not mean they should continue.

Just as the Government of the United States has needed to take on new roles, just as corporate bloating has become open to public scorn, churches, synagogues and universities need to take good hard look at their values and priorities.

AND ABOUT US

For many of us - perhaps even for most of us - this recession has had deep and continuing effects. For some, planning for retirement - or even retirement itself - has become a deep financial problem. We wonder whether the impact of the recession will be abiding or short lived.

For others, who lost their jobs, their self-image has been damaged. How much of ourselves was dependent on where we worked or what our job status is. And how much of what we own, told about who we are, and what we want the world to think about us.

We all have had to face new realities about the world and about ourselves.

In a very real sense, the recession has called America and each of us to our own High Holy Day season.

We don't have priests in Judaism, to whom we are required to confess. We have a harder judge and taskmaster: ourselves.

On Yom Kippur we shall recite a list of sins, individual and communal which we might or might not have committed. This is the framework of our Jewish sense of responsibility and obligation.

During this period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we are asked to look inside of our selves. We are asked to examine what kind of life we lead, what our values are, what is our contribution to society as a whole.

The reference points are in the liturgy of our worship service. The judgement is ours and ours alone.

Just as the recession has caused many to re-order their lives, to re-think their priorities, so we are asked by our Jewish faith to do the same.

There is an old rabbinic story. Perhaps it's Chasidic. I am even hesitant to tell it, because I suspect that so many of you have heard it before. There was a very pious rabbi named Zusya who was approaching his end- of days. As he grew weaker and weaker, he became quite agitated.

Seeing his agitation, an angel of God appeared (you now know that it's a true story!). The angel asked what was the cause of this agitation. Zusya responded by saying that "As I approach the gate of heaven, I am afraid that they Holy One will ask me why I was not more like Moses, like Isaiah, and the rest of the prophets of the Torah. That's why I am so nervous." The angel replied: God will not ask you why were you not more like Moses, or Isaiah or the rest of the prophets. He will ask, Why were you not more like Zusya.

CONCLUSION

Rosh Hashanah asks us to look back upon the last year, to measure ourselves according to the eternal standards of Judaism. In one sense, America and the world have had to face their own High Holy Day season. A time of reckoning!

Regrettably, last year brought much pain to many of us. Indeed, the recession has placed obligations on the American government, on corporations and the institutions of our community to alleviate this pain.

Here we stand at the beginning of the new year, filled with hope and anticipation. We know that next year will be better than last. At least we hope so. It could not have been much worse.

But we approach with the sure knowledge that our evaluation of ourselves and our lives will bring us comfort that we shall live by those values that kept our mothers and fathers hopeful and faithful through these centuries.

Amen.