



Partying Like It's 5760: A Jewish View of the Millennium

By Rachel T. Sabath

Theories of the significance of the coming of the new millennium abound. Just about everything you read or see this year has some reference to Y2K.

Hasn't everyone thought, if only for a second, how it will-or won't-impact on us? Our businesses? Our families? Our health? Our healthcare? Our travel? Our communication? Our finances? Our being?

There are fears of a recession, a depression, accidents, false messiahs, suicidal cults, general mass hysteria. Whether we view Y2K as the New Year's party of the century or as a dangerous opportunity for fundamentalists and extremists to get out of hand, it is difficult to ignore.

Then there's the possibility, some would say a good possibility, that January 1st, 2000 will have no significance whatsoever. According to this theory, the hype about Y2K is just that-the result of marketing.

Still, there's another possibility. Maybe some of this emphasis on Y2K is in part to give global meaning to a liminal moment in time. Maybe the world is becoming unified by experiencing together the anticipation, the fear, the excitement of a new millennium, and will be further connected by the transition itself.

The Jewish calendar, which earlier this month marked the beginning of the year 5760, marks time very differently. January 1, 2000 will be 23 Tevet 5760, just another Sabbath Day, a time to rest and reflect on the world, and to pray for peace. Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish New Year, celebrates the anniversary of the creation of the world, the world's birthday. The Jewish tradition accepts the existence of other ways of calculating time, but seeks to maintain its own sense of eternal cosmic time. Humans devise ways of calculating days and dates, and we exist within time, but we do not create time. Whether or not we accept the notion that the earth was created 5,760 years ago, the co-existence of the Jewish and Gregorian calendars allows us to experience a tension between a calendar that much of the world uses to live and interpret history and events, and a calendar that seeks to measure time in a cosmic, universal, ultimate sense.

As we celebrate the passage of time and the possibilities of the future, we have the opportunity to consider the significance of time. When we start to speak of drastic shifts or tumultuous times, when the world seems particularly confusing or confused, we search for clarity, we start to reach for that which centers us. What helps us to locate ourselves and what allows us to find our "true north" on our internal compass?

A story from the Talmud, an ancient Jewish text codified at the end of the fifth century CE, illustrates the importance of perspective:

Once, Joseph, son of Joshua (the son of Levi), fell ill. They thought that he had passed on. In fact, he was unconscious.

Then he suddenly regained consciousness. It was as if he returned from some far away place. As he regained consciousness, his father said to him: "What did you see?" Joseph said: "I saw an Olam Hafuch (a world turned upside down). What is above was below and what is below was above...." His father said to him: "My son, you have seen the world clearly. You have seen an Olam Brurah (a clear world)...." [Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 50a]

How do we understand this? What did he see? According to one interpretation, that of Rashi, an early medieval French commentator, Rabbi Joseph saw a world in which what is important seemed a trifle, and what is nothing seemed to be of great significance. Joseph didn't lose perspective, for he still knew that as a human being he exists between the heavens and the earth. So while the world seemed upside down, his father assures him that what seemed entirely upside down was actually right-side up, and that he maintained a clear view of reality.

When our worlds seem turned upside down, can we still maintain a sense of perspective? Do we have a sense of our "true north," of our core values?

When all is turned upside down, what enables us to get our bearings?

This next millennium, replete with all its hype, gives us an opportunity to look out at the world and to try to make sense of what we see, to attempt to clarify what we want the future to hold, far off or more immediately. These days give us the opportunity to clarify our role within the ideal world that we can barely imagine.

We can look out and see tragedy, earthquakes, wars, killing, disease.... Or we can look out, on this Birthday of the World, this Rosh HaShanah, and ask: What does this world need from each of us? How can we create a world that seems more clear, more as it should be, and less upside down? What role shall we each play at this crazy time?

What must we do so that we can play out our respective roles to heal the world, to repair it, to reunify it, to lift it upward, to upgrade it?

Gaping holes in meaning cry out to be filled, and millennial fever provides probable cover for messiahs of all sorts. Messiahs, after all, help to create certainty where there is none, a sense of clarity in a time of confusion. How do we make sense of these transitions, and position our own individual lives within them? Are we gliding along allowing outside influences to determine our fates, or

is there some internal force, some internal knowledge or power that enables us, to the best of our ability, to determine our own fates?

Particularly in a time when the world seems upside down, it becomes even more essential to have an orientation, a sense of time, core values that transcend all interpretations, all religions, and all political parties. We each need to know our internal compass, and find our "true north".

