

That was the Year that Was
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2009/5770
Rabbi Robert S. Goldstein

I sometimes play a little game in my head. While I am in the midst of some dramatic moment, or even a more banal or prosaic one, I try to imagine how I will remember the experience.

When I look forward to something with great anticipation...a concert, the rare time when all three of our kids are with us, I stop and think, one year or two years down the road, in memory at least, will the event have lived up to my expectations.

Sometimes when I am doing something a bit more routine, certainly not unimportant, but more a part of my regular schedule, like teaching a class, visiting someone in the hospital, when I think back on that experience, will I think, “Gosh, I felt good about that class...or I really connected with the person I visited.” Did I have, as theologian Martin Buber would call it, “an I/Though experience!”

I play the same mental game on Rosh Hashanah. I look back at the year just ended and I ask myself, “How will I remember 5769, or October 2008 through September 2009? What kind of year was it, and what will I most remember?”

There was the drama: like the Bernie Madoff scandal, or the money laundering rabbis from New Jersey. Who could forget that picture on the front page of the New York Times...a bunch of orthodox rabbis, dressed in black with their *tzitzes* dangling from their sides as they walked hand-cuffed into the police wagon.

There was the financial meltdown. Unemployment hit record highs. Jewish institutions all over the country were either forced to cut back, others closed, a number merged.

There was the craven attack on the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. by an anti government extremist, which left an innocent security guard dead.

In Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister and his predecessor, Ehud Olmert was indicted. There was a short but violent war in Gaza, and sadly peace continues to be as elusive as ever.

Back here in America, there were the typical celebrity scandals. The governor of South Carolina spent a little unaccounted for time in Argentina. There was Michael Jackson...what a tragic end; such talent squandered. There was the death of great men and women...Walter Cronkite, Ted Kennedy, his sister, Eunice Shriver, and just the other day, one of the great balladeers of my day, Mary Travers.

But the year wasn't all gloom and sadness; there were also moments of great human triumph. Like on that November night, almost a year ago, when another racial barrier was shattered and a black man was elected president. One would have to have a heart of stone not to have been moved by image of an African-American president, his wife and daughters standing on that chilly autumn platform in Chicago's Grant Park.

And the inauguration week in January; the euphoria was infectious. Particularly since the week began with the miraculous landing of a disabled jet in the icy waters of the Hudson River. Now that event was a good lesson for those of us, myself among them, who stopped believing in miracles.

And so we end 5769, a year of disappointment and loss, but also a year of memorable moments of great majesty and awe.

Do you remember singer Peggy Lee's 1969 hit single: "Is that all there is..." The song resurrected Peggy Lee's nearly dead career.

The first stanza is about a woman rescued from her burning house. When she realizes everything has been lost, she sings the refrain, "Is that all there is? Is that all there is? Is that all there is my friends, so then, lets keep dancing."

The second verse is about a child who with great anticipation and excitement, goes to the circus for the first time. The show of course, doesn't live up to his unrealistic expectations; it couldn't possibly. And again, the refrain: "Is that all there is? Is that all there is? Is that all there is my friends, so then, lets keep dancing."

And finally the song ends with a failed first love, “Is that all there is my friends, so then, lets keep dancing.”

The song was actually written by two Jewish guys: Jerry Leiber and Al Stoller. They based it on a short story called “Disillusionment” written in the late 1800’s by the famous German novelist, Thomas Mann. Mann was a philosopher and writer, who often chose melancholy themes for his work. He was obsessed with the futility and at times, according to him, pointlessness of life.

The song, however, is more hopeful than Mann’s short story. It is actually an *homage*, an acknowledgement to the fact that, yes, life is unpredictable. One day we’re up, the next, we are in a free fall, uncertain when we will hit the bottom.

But the song is also a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit; we don’t have to allow our failures, our disappointments to defeat us. We can pick ourselves up. Figure out how to deal with those often random and uncontrollable circumstances we cannot foresee. And then, move on. In fact, find happiness, and even flourish.

There is a great old story about a man who worked at the circus, whose job it was to clean up after the elephants. He would come home from work each day and complain to his wife about what a thoroughly unpleasant job he had.

Finally, after listening to his complaints for so many years, his wife grew exasperated, “So then quit,” she said.

“What! And give up show business???” he cried.

And so on this night, this eve of the New Year, we come together as a community...in sacred convocation...the young and not so young, the regulars, the three times a year Jews, our guests, no matter what brought you here, tonight we are one congregation.

I pray that over these next days, we can inspire each other, draw strength from each other, and ultimately find deep within our own souls the will to embrace our blessings, and endure, even at times with heavy hearts, the

challenges we may face this next year. Come what may, we *will* find a way to keep dancing.

Tit-chadashe Alaynu, Renew us O God, on the eve of this New Year, bring us happiness and health, contentment and joy, peace at home and abroad. And mostly, we pray may Your loving grace find its way into our hearts and our homes...Amen