

RABBI'S MESSAGE

What Happens Next?

When the “big” holidays, the really High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are over, I am reminded of my younger years in high school and college. At the end of a school year, final exams were looming as well as the due dates for final papers. I would cram, study, lose some sleep, work hard, procrastinate and procrastinate some more. I was nervous and often questioned myself: Had I studied enough? Did I know the material? Did I express myself well on the assignments? How will I be judged? Then, in a matter of a few days, the exams were complete, and the papers were submitted. While waiting for the results, I breathed a sigh of relief. Soon afterwards, I would discover that I did well enough to progress to the next level of learning.

The emotions surrounding High Holidays can be similar. Granted, for a rabbi, the pressure is a little more intense. But the anticipation of a New Year is there for all of us. We focus our energies on these powerful days of worship, asking God to accept our prayers and inscribe us in the metaphorical “Book of Life” for a good year. People may start their emotional preparation for a new year at various times. The Jewish calendar gives us reminders beginning several months before. On Passover, we acknowledge freedom from bondage, and seven weeks later, on Shavuot, we celebrate receiving the Ten Commandments. After Shavuot comes Tisha B’Av, commemorating the date of the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Each of these is a time of transition and renewal. Jewish life changed when we left Egypt, when received the Torah and when we changed our mode of worship from Temple sacrifices to communal prayer and study. Each of these events helps us think about the concept of starting something new. Every Passover, we have the opportunity to re-explore the concept of freedom. On Shavuot, we renew our commitment to Commandments and on Tisha B’Av we can contemplate how to deal with loss and move on to something new.

When students complete a level of learning, the next step can stimulate both excitement and nervous anticipation. It might be moving on from high school to college, or to a graduate program or to a job. It might even be completing a bar or bat mitzvah and becoming ready to develop into becoming a Jewish adult. We look back on what we’ve accomplished, and look forward to the mysteries of taking that next step. That is the excitement of a New Year. Whatever went into last year is a springboard for what happens next.

I am finally beginning to learn how endings and beginnings are linked. My graduation from college was a short-lived celebration that began the excitement for my first professional job. When I completed my rabbinic ordination, already several years into my service at Temple Beth Torah, I focused on becoming a better rabbi. A wedding is also a celebration that leads to the ongoing development of a committed relationship. The death of a spouse or a divorce, though hardly a celebration, is also a transition to the next step of life. With each transition, we learn how to move on.

That’s probably why Simchat Torah (literally “*the joy of learning*”) comes so soon after Yom Kippur. We’ve just completed “finals week” – the awesome mission of evaluating the past

and preparing for the future. And *then*, we complete one level of Torah learning by reading the last section of Deuteronomy and *immediately* begin the next step by starting over with Genesis. And we call it a “simcha” – a joy. Because transitions, even hard ones, help us learn, grow and become the people we were destined to become.

What happens next? That is a mystery. And we’ll learn about it together, helping each other every new step of the way.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon