

RABBI'S MESSAGE

What's New?

There was a time, not so long ago, when most of us kept calendars, datebooks, appointment books, etc. in paper notebooks. My father kept his planners in a notebook that was approximately 5 X 7 inches. This was called a "day planner." Each day had its own page and there were lines to write in appointments for every hour of the workday, with extra space at the bottom for evening appointments or engagements. Until recently, dozens of these day planners were in the basement of my childhood home, and you could leaf through decades of notebooks to see what appointments my father had throughout his career.

As a young professional, I kept a similar datebook, and experimented with several different sizes and styles, even though the example my father had shown me, every year was exactly the same format. My mother had a monthly calendar taped to the refrigerator, so everyone could see what was happening. It included birthdays, schedules for visitors, when the housekeeper or repair person was coming, and an ongoing grocery list where anyone with a pencil could make additions. Now, I keep my calendar in a cloud. My computer, phone and iPad are synched with each other. I can color-code different kinds of events and set the program to give me audible reminders, to invite other people to the appointment and do many other things I have yet to discover. It is very efficient; but there is a piece of me that misses the paper calendars I can leaf through and the big refrigerator calendar that everyone in the household can see.

Almost 40 years ago, as a young single man, I remember hosting a New Year's Eve party in my small apartment in Pittsburgh. While I knew most of the guests, some people brought friends who I did not know. We watched the big ball in Times Square count down to midnight, and at the right time, people exchanged hugs and kisses to welcome in the New Year. One young woman who I did not know, acknowledged midnight in a different way. Most of us were of us were embracing each other and shouting "Happy New Year; but our happy and hopeful exclamation was interrupted with a demonstrative display of emotion, as one woman violently tore up her calendar from the previous year. She seemed to express a variety of feelings, laughing to herself as she destroyed the notebook that contained the dates of a year she clearly wanted to forget.

I never found out if this woman's 1986 was better than her 1985. But I remember having my doubts that the destructive act of tearing a calendar would make a difference. If we are looking for reasons to forget 2023, there are plenty. Slow recovery from a pandemic has left us with continuing fear. An attack to our beloved homeland, and the ensuing, ongoing war gives us confusing and controversial feelings about the value of human life and the tragedies involved in self-preservation. An alarming number of antisemitic acts throughout the world, especially on college campuses make us wonder about the direction of future leadership. An unacceptable number of people have been murdered in mass shootings that have multiplied in astonishing

ways in the last 25 years. Our political leaders and those who aspire to lead are setting a disturbing example of hostility that seems to teach leadership is about insulting and humiliating anyone who gets in your way. We don't discard last year easily.

Today's version of ripping up a calendar might be to push "control-alt-delete" on our collective computers. How might that sort of re-boot help us hope that 2024 will be better?

It's certainly not an easy question to answer. Perhaps, it's about finding the good, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, and seeing how we can build on that. We can look to the future as much as the past, and find the potential to focus on the positive. Think about people who have been in your life who you haven't connected with in a while and reach out to catch up. When you meet someone new, try to find out something special about them and become open to a new friendship. It may be hard to start a New Year with a completely blank slate. After all, historic lessons have taught us to "never forget." At the same time, we can "always remember" the potential for good.

Later this month is the celebration of Tu B'Shevat, also known as the "Jewish Arbor Day." A famous story is told in the Talmud about a sage named Honi, who observed an elder man planting a carob tree. He informed the elder that a carob tree takes 70 years to bear fruit, and suggested the man would never live to see the fruit of his labor. He told Honi, "There were trees here when I came into this world. I want to make sure there are trees here for my grandchildren."

In the New Year, 2024, I hope we can plant the seeds of understanding and listening, open minds and open hearts. It may take time, but the potential is there for beautiful and delicious blossoming.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon