

This is a year like none other! How often have we heard these, or similar words since March? When it all began, many of us thought it would be over by Pesach. Then, we were hopeful that it would be behind us by Shavuot. And now, we enter the new year still in the throes of the pandemic, cautiously optimistic, but fully aware that it is far from over. From Pesach to Rosh HaShanah – halfway around our liturgical calendar, months filled with holidays marking the most difficult, formative times of our Jewish history: The Exodus, trekking through the wilderness fearful and often discontent, receiving our Torah and learning about our responsibilities (we're still learning), and an ongoing litany of tragedies, exile, and new beginnings – and now, COVID-19. We Jews understand change, and we know how to adapt. At our Pesach seder we ask, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Today we might well ask, "Why is this year different from all other years?"

Before we discuss the obvious, let's delve into the Hebrew root שנה – a veritable multitasker meaning *year, to repeat or review; to be different, to change, alter or switch* (with related words for *tooth* and *sleep*). Underlying all of these words is the notion of repetition juxtaposed with change – separation, change, returning – in cyclical fashion. Seen in this light, repetition and change go hand in hand. Every new year we turn the calendar back to the fresh, new month *Tishrei*, and we turn our Torah back to the beginning. Seasons and words repeat year after year, but we change, accumulating experiences of gains and losses, successes and failures that influence our lives and how we relate to our texts.

No two years are exactly alike, but this year is profoundly different, as we know all too well. A virus gone viral has brought the world to a standstill, causing unforeseen hardship and tragedy as it redefines what we consider "normal." The changes the pandemic has necessitated have swiftly and sharply separated us from the lives we used to live, generating worry and fear along with increasing unrest and rebellion. As more aspects of our lives move into the virtual world, we are becoming painfully aware that there is still much to be done to enable everyone to participate fully. It has been, and will continue to be, an uphill battle. The collateral damage is indescribably huge, not only financially, but also emotionally. However, we are beginning to glimpse a few collateral benefits as well:

- Modern technology, from the good, old telephone to all the virtual media, enables us to communicate with people all over the world, forging new relationships and deepening others as we work, learn, and commiserate together. Throughout the religious world, virtual services, including our own, offer a wide array of creative opportunities to worship together safely. We may not be together in person, but we can be together in spirit!
- Because this "equal opportunity" virus attacks people of all ages, races, and creeds indiscriminately and irrespective of national borders, people have begun to realize that searching for ways to assist those who have the virus and prevent others from contracting it must be a global effort. We can only hope that international cooperation along these lines will eventually foster more peace among us fractious humans.
- As lockdowns have forced us to reconsider what we deem essential, we are becoming more attuned to our own true needs and the needs of our family, friends, and environment, becoming less materialistic in the process.
- Last but not least, creativity on all levels has grown by leaps and bounds. People in the restaurant, museum, entertainment, and sports industries are finding wonderfully innovative ways to reach out to their public, and schools are trying valiantly to develop programs to keep students interested and on track. Creativity and collaboration go hand in hand, which means that people are connecting as never before, with results that will bear fruit for years to come. That alone is reason for gratitude, even in the midst of a pandemic!

These are small rays of hope in our dark, turbulent, dangerous world, but they can keep us from utter despair. It's naive to suggest that we put on a happy face and pretend that everything is just fine. It isn't, and we know it. This year is most certainly different from all other years. The changes have been profound, and we too, have been significantly changed. My deepest wish for us all, is that as we strive to combat the negative changes wrought by the pandemic, we may also acknowledge and appreciate the positive changes this year has given us and carry them into the future. As we enter the *Yamim Noraim*, our High Holidays, let us come together to pray, to eat and talk, to enjoy each other's company, and to encourage one another – this year virtually, next year, בעזרת השם (G-d willing) face to face. As Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z"l so beautifully said, "The only way to get it together is together!"

Shabbat shalom, and *SHANAH TOVAH* – a good year / a good change!