

WELCOME TO 5770, a Thanksgiving Year

Maybe this is not the kind of column you expect after Simhat Torah. By this time all the New Year cards are long since bought, mailed, received and even hung in the Succah. And the stirring sound of the Shofar welcomed you to this year some time ago.

True enough. Of course while you were sending and receiving all those New Year cards, I was doing what others in my profession do every year at this time - making all the detailed preparations for the High Holy days. We had to try once again to reach the goal of those long and demanding services. As the Yiddish expression goes, we had to oisbet'n a gut yor - literally, to "beg out a good year."

And here it is, 5770. This figures to be an important year for my friends in Chabad, since its number contains the Brooklyn address of Chabad's world headquarters. Will it be a special year for the Jewish people?

Can we expect the Messiah to arrive this year? We could really use his help. Sometimes I remember a discussion about the Messiah that I held with a class of teenagers once. After exploring several views on the subject, one boy declared "I think we are all the Messiah!" What could happen if we all felt that way!

Compared with other recent years, this one is starting on some negative notes. Economic downturn, rising anti-Semitism, policy failures in the United States and in Israel, all point to a difficult year ahead. Yet our experience tells us we can weather the storm.

Symbolic of our tradition of hope is the Succah - the humble hut where we ate our meals during the week after Yom Kippur. If someone in the family is extra courageous, sleeping in the Succah is also proper. After dark, you should be able to look up through the branches that form the succah's roof, and see the stars. Inside that little hut, no light. But up there, hope twinkles.

Think of the U.N. as an international Succah. Inside, the enemies of freedom manipulate it into darkness: slanted reports vilify Israel for defending itself against

terrorist attacks; Islamofascists proclaim false and evil messages like "our nuclear program is for peaceful purposes" or "the Holocaust never happened - but we'll make it happen." Yet, away from the arena of political pollution, there are millions of people who labor to live in peace, to raise their children, and to respect their neighbors. They are the ones who can make this a good year - despite recession, despite jihad, despite official doubletalk. Their positive goals are the stars we see through the roof.

Judged by Succah standards, 5770 will be a year of challenge. That is not a condition to dread. That is an opportunity. Remember, other holidays - like Hanukkah, Purim, Passover - celebrate miracles. Succoth is not concerned with miracles. Succoth celebrates nature. As to miracles, they are defined as something that happens against all predictable possibilities, and brings unforeseen blessing. Nature fulfills very predictable possibilities and brings the blessings we work for. Harvest, sustenance, prosperity. That's why the Pilgrims patterned the first Thanksgiving after the Biblical description of Succoth, or as they probably called it Tabernacles. Across the border in Canada, Thanksgiving Day occurs in October, putting it even closer to Succoth.

Succoth and Thanksgiving share a spirit of gratitude for the bounties of creation. One of the most beautiful symbols of Succoth is represented by the Arba minim - the Four Species: four different kinds of growing things. They are the palm, the willow, the myrtle and the citron. Why those four? One explanation is that those four represent different features of our bodies: the palm for the spine, straight and tall; the willow leaf is shaped like the lips; the myrtle like the eye; and the citron like the heart. We should serve G-d's purposes by standing erect, by speaking the truth, by keeping our eyes open to find our way, and by feeling for those around us.

In that spirit, let's embark on 5770. A year of challenge, to be sure, and a year when we can work with other hopeful people toward fulfillment of our dreams, justice for our cause, honesty in our dealings and increased understanding.

Have a happy Thanksgiving and a good year.