

ROSH HASHANA 5772 – SECOND DAY
September 30, 2011

Ever since I collected baseball cards as a kid (which, of course, my Mom later threw out), I've always loved math and been really good at it. I've always been able to figure out batting averages and do most math equations in my head.

So I was really intrigued when, earlier this year, Harold Camping, a now 90 year old Christian radio and TV broadcaster, predicted that "The Rapture" would occur on May 21, 2011. According to Camping, Jesus would return to Earth, hundreds of thousands of righteous people would ascend to heaven and the Earth would be plagued with fire, brimstone and more, with millions of people dying every day until the world actually ends on October 21.

I was especially interested in hearing this news because I have often watched Harold Camping on TV. Going back to my student rabbi days in Sandusky, Ohio, I've had a thing for watching TV preachers. However, unlike the fiery Jimmy Swaggart, the tear-jerking, faith-healer Ernest Angley or the other preachers I would watch, Camping did not make for great TV. His show was so fascinating because it was so dull. It essentially consisted of this ninety year old man sitting in a chair reading the Bible and giving some commentary. For a few minutes, ok, but he was on for hour after hour every day.

Of course, May 21 came and went. Camping's prediction did not come to pass, but Camping soon came out with revised mathematical calculations and said that May 21 was a day of spiritual rapture and that the entire world will now end with a cataclysmic destruction three weeks from, well, today, on October 21.

Now, before you go and sell everything you own and, at the risk of being a bit harsh, Camping has been making these kind of predictions for more than twenty years. In early June of this year, just a few weeks following that May 21 date, Harold Camping suffered a stroke and much of his recorded programming has been removed from his Family Radio website as he attempts rehabilitation in a California nursing home.

However, before any of us go casting aspersions, which would be a sin comparable to those we cast into the water yesterday during Tashlikh, we should know that we Jews also have a bit of a history of engaging in this practice of predicting the end of the world. In the Tractate Avodah Zarah (page 9-aleph), the Talmud states that “the world as we know it, will only exist for six thousand years.

The Tanna DeBay Eliyahu taught: The world is to exist six thousand years; the first two thousand are to be "void" (of Torah), the next two thousand are the period of the Torah [from Abraham until the completion of the part of the Talmud known as the Mishna), and the last two thousand are the period of the Messiah, meaning that the Messiah can arrive any time during a two thousand year period, of which we are currently in the 1,772nd year.

Of course, many in the Chabad or Lubavitch community, believe that their deceased Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson was the Messiah. They believed it while he lived and many continue to believe it after his death, visiting his grave in Queens 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

According to some Jewish traditions, when the Messiah arrives, all of the Jews will return to Israel from the Diaspora, the dead will be resurrected from their graves and all of Israel's enemies will be defeated. In addition, animal sacrifices and harvest and grain offerings will again be offered in the rebuilt Third Temple and the Messiah will rule over the Jewish people. Then, a huge battle, commonly known as Armageddon, will take place, during which the Jewish people will be saved and humanity will enjoy a thousand years of peace, holiness and blessing.

Now, I am not a believer in Harold Camping's predictions. However, since that May 21 date, the economies of the world have gone haywire, as has the stock market and the weather. (It even rained yesterday on Rosh Hashana!) Summer, which began only a month after Camping's target date, gave us not only a hurricane, but an earthquake as well, not to mention the torrential rains and oppressive heat. Meanwhile, Libya, Syria and Egypt underwent major upheavals and we witnessed unimaginable savagery from a Jew in Brooklyn and unimaginable stupidity from a New York Jewish congressman.

The Torah portion we read today is the traditional account of how God created our world. However, what role might God play in the world's destruction and even, in it's day-to-day functioning? While I don't have the definitive answer. I can tell you that Judaism does not generally believe that God is about to destroy the world. We do not believe that God is about to bring back Jesus, Mohammed or even Moses any time soon. God looks to us to build the world, but we have

the free will to do that or to take actions which cause the world to suffer and crumble. In other words, it's all up to us.

It might be more comforting to believe that God is always watching us, but the truth is that, even for a believer like me, I don't know why certain prayers seem to be answered and others aren't. I can't explain why good things sometimes happen to bad people and bad things sometimes happen to good people. I can't explain a lot about God, but when I look around at the world and the way in which many people live their lives, I realize that I also can't explain a lot about people. Why do so many people spend so much of their lives pursuing such nonsense? Why do so many nations of the world reward evil actions with positive attention? Why are so many people hypocritical, mean, shallow and cruel?

No, I can't explain why a lot of things happen in the world, but I can explain how we can transform certain ideas from potential to reality. At our seder tables, we open the door for the prophet Elijah, who is to herald the arrival of the Messiah. A beautiful tradition of one Hasidic rebbe was for Elijah's cup to be filled by everyone pouring a bit from their own cups. This symbolized that redemption of the world will result from our taking action and not from waiting for the Messiah.

As we come together today, on the anniversary of the world's creation, we are reminded that none of us created this world, but we are all here as its care-takers. Today, our Torah portion celebrates the creation of the world. And if, as I suspect, Harold Camping's calculations are incorrect, then we have the

responsibility of choosing how we are going to care for this world, our home and the people with whom we share it. Will we walk past the litter or recycling materials or pick them up and put them where they belong? Will we spend our entire lives talking constantly about what we want and need or will we focus more on the needs and wants of other people? Will we constantly be critical of others or will we give them the benefit of the doubt more often? Will we pay more attention to how we impact the impact on the environment with our vehicles, our clothing and what we use to wrap items in or will we ignore it all?

We have the option of always blaming other people for our problems or we can take an honest look at ourselves and, if we dare, asking those whom we trust for an honest opinion about how we live our lives, how we treat others and what positive changes we can make in our lives. We have the option of then getting mad at the people who respond truthfully or we can listen, learn and make positive changes in our lives. No one wants to hear anything unpleasant about themselves or their actions, but if we hope to truly improve ourselves in the new year, we need the honest truth, if we can handle the truth.

Life isn't easy, but it is a wonderful blessing and we only possess it for a limited, unknown period of time. While I believe that God supports us and helps us, God is not our servant; we are supposed to be God's servant.

That is why we seek self improvement and societal improvement on these days. If all we teach our young people to go after is the big bucks and the shallow, superficial and materialistic qualities we say that we reject, then we are going to

have to practice what we preach. We seem to be creating a reality-show society, but the first thing we all learned about reality shows is that were fake.

If we want to create a society with substance, we have to get more serious, because at the rate we are going, we may prove Harold Camping right, except that it won't be God who will destroy our world, it will be us.

This year in particular, we have an opportunity to be more involved in making things right. A presidential election year is a prime time to be involved at a wide variety of levels because everything is looked at more closely. Whether it is countering hatred with kindness, nonsense with knowledge or ignorance with wisdom, we have the responsibility and the opportunity to lift ourselves and our society out of mediocrity.

We need to do a much better job of raising our kids, of preparing our kids for the world and treating people with a positive spirit. The High Holy Days give us an opportunity to get recentered, kind of a spiritual chiropractic adjustment.

Whether we are believers or not, we are either part of the solution for improving ourselves, our society and our world or we are part of the problem.

This year, people around the world are marching for social change. Oppressed Muslims in Syria, Egypt and Libya finally protested their governments. Israelis went to the streets to protest the high cost of living, while we in America, are too busy blogging and tweeting. Could everyone please get off of their phones and

actually do something productive? Enough with the constant videos, links and pictures! How about actually participating in the reality show which is our lives?

Our people, our nation, our world cries out for leadership. The world we live in today is a scary, topsy-turvy place and we have perpetuated a system which gives us presidential candidates who make us cringe, not just this year, but for many years, in both parties.

A new year demands renewed vigor and determination in tackling the many problems our society confronts. I have long quoted the Talmudic sage Rabbi Tarfon who taught “Lo alekha ham’lakha lig’mor v’lo ata ven horin l’hibatel mimena,” we are not required to complete the task all by ourselves, but we still have to do our part.”

This year, may we resolve to support and build up those who need our help. May we challenge those whose message seems to take us in the wrong direction because, whether we like it or not, we are all in the same boat, a boat which is often captained by buffoons. When we don’t get involved in the process, others make the decisions which come to affect our lives.

If not now, when? AMEN