

**Past, Present, Future**  
**Erev Rosh Hashana 5772**  
**Temple Beth-El**  
**Rabbi Jeffrey Weill**

When I was 17, it was a very good year.  
When I was younger, so much younger than today.  
69 I was 21, and called the road my own.  
Back in the summer of 69, oh yeah.  
I reminisce about the days of old, and that old time rock and roll!  
Do you remember, the 21<sup>st</sup> night of September?  
Oh what a night, late December back in 63.  
Let me take you back, 'cause I'm going to...Strawberry Fields.  
Oh, what I want to know: where does the time go?  
Those were the days!  
Those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end  
We'd sing and dance forever and a day  
We'd live the life we'd choose  
We'd fight and never lose  
For we were young and sure to have our way!

Thank you and good night!

Ah, Nostalgia: the remembrance of things past, looking back wistfully, longing for better days and simpler times.

It's a natural human feeling, nostalgia. Most of us get nostalgic. We have the feeling, with the march of years and stampede of progress, that we have lost something – in our own lives, or in our towns, or in our nation -- we have lost something that was somehow better than what we have created and what we have become.

Nostalgia permeates popular culture. Besides my medley, think of TV. In the seventies, we watched a show about the fifties, Happy Days. In the early eighties, The Big Chill characters romanticized their youth in the sixties, and in the late eighties we started watching the Wonder Years, also about the sixties. In the nineties, we watched That Seventies Show. In the 2000s, we began looking back to The Greatest Generation, and felt ourselves inadequate by comparison. And today, there is a revival of the nineties boy bands, like New Kids On the Block, who are really not so new anymore.

Our own tradition has its own take on romanticizing the past. I'm referring of course to the topic of my article in the June bulletin. Who remembers that one? It was the feature article, prominently displayed on page four. In that article, I discussed the notion of "Yeridat ha'Dorot." If ever there were a pessimistic view of time, it is Yeridat ha'Dorot, which means the Descent of the Generations. This notion holds that earlier generations of Jews were more righteous than subsequent generations, because the earlier generations were closer to the moment of revelation at Mt Sinai. With each passing generation our

nexus to that covenantal moment at the mountain becomes more and more attenuated. Yeridat ha'Dorot implies that we are much less righteous than our ancestors, and that our children and grandchildren – I know some of you will have trouble believing this – that our grandchildren will be much less righteous than we. The Talmud states the idea with characteristic sharpness. “If the earlier scholars were sons of angels, we are sons of men. And if the earlier scholars were sons of men, we are like asses” (Shabbat 112b). Ouch!

Who among us does not harbor a nostalgic impulse? I do. I certainly did. When I was a 17, my weakness was for the 1960s, specifically '66 to '69. My clothes, hair style, and musical tastes reflected that. My high school yearbook has a shot of me with shaggy hair, torn jeans and a denim jacket adorned with peace sign buttons. I'm flashing the peace sign above a caption that reads, “Jeff Weill steps out of his time machine and into the sixties.” Right on!

My grandfather Leo, of blessed memory, toward the end of his life, once chanted a defiant mantra to me about the superiority of the past: “1929!” he said. “But, Grandpa, the Depression!” “1929!” “But, Grandpa, 25 percent of the country was unemployed!” “1929!” Of course, my grandfather knew the 1929 of his youth was a troubled year, to say the least. But he romanticized it. 1929 possessed something important that he missed.

So, we romanticize the past. And the present? We catastrophize the present.

We tend to view the present as a catastrophe, or on the verge of catastrophe. The *now* always seems to be the beginning of the end. We've reached the point of no return; our best days are behind us; the sky is falling.

This feeling is the underpinning of the fringe Christian belief in the Rapture, the belief that the righteous soon will be taken away, swooped up to heaven, while the rest of us wait here for impending apocalyptic doom, which is right around the corner. One preacher from California, of course, has predicted a date for the Rapture. It was last May. If the Rapture did happen in May, well, my friends, you and I are still here. Left behind in this un-rapturous present.

And is the present not bleak? Most of us feel gloomy. One recent poll found that more than eighty percent of Americans are “dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country.” Frank Bruni of the New York Times wrote recently that “down” is the syllable du jour, from the downturn in the economy to the downgrading of our credit rating from AAA to AA+. Double A+ seems like a pretty good grade to me, but our country is not in the mood to see things optimistically. We have a \$1.3 trillion deficit and sluggish annual growth. The Congressional Budget Office predicts that unemployment will remain greater than eight percent until at least 2014.

Meanwhile, we've been fighting wars on multiple fronts. Our homeland Israel is the odd man out at the UN and in a troublingly changed Middle East. And we face a global environmental threat which we seem incapable of really confronting seriously.

Our politicians don't help. The columnist Kurt Anderson wrote in August that our "current self-destructive political dysfunction" is like an incurable "autoimmune disorder." And Bruni offered this most devastating critique of our nation. America's "can-do spirit," he wrote, has given way to "make-do resignation" and that many of us and our fellow Americans believe that – quote – "our best days may be behind us." Those were the days, indeed. //

Perhaps some of you have seen Midnight In Paris, Woody Allen's latest offering. That film captures some of this malaise about the current state of things. The protagonist, Gil, played by Owen Wilson, is on vacation in Paris with his fiancé. Gil's not much interested in Paris as it is. Rather, he cannot stop romanticizing Paris as it was, the Paris of the 1920s, when that beautiful city was home to those brilliant American ex-pats, like Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others.

One night Gil, finds himself lost and alone in Paris. Just as the church bells chime midnight, an old-fashioned car drives up and takes him back in time to 1920s Paris, where he rubs elbows with his literary heroes. It happens each night, precisely at midnight, that in-the-middle moment, between yesterday and tomorrow.

During his visits back in time, Gil meets a beautiful woman from the 1920s and guess how she feels about 1920's Paris? She's bored by it! She wants to escape her decade. If she could, she'd rather leave it for La Belle Epoque of the 1870s so she could hang out with Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Paul Gauguin.

And that's when Gil has a revelation. He realizes that the present, no matter when that present is, no matter what year or what decade, he realizes that the present is messy. It's always going to be messy. The reason we romanticize the past, the reason we make the past so rosy is because the present is always so murky. It's a ball of confusion – that's what the world is today, and every decade, from the tumultuous sixties, to the Greatest Generation forties, to the roaring twenties. Whenever the present is, it's still just...the present.

I once became really down about the current state of things. This was about 20 years ago. I was in law school, and I remember feeling that the world, despite our best efforts, never really changes. I expressed this to a professor, an old atheist constitutional law professor named Burt Wechsler. We were sitting in his office when I shared this with him, that that ain't hadash tachat ha'shemesh, there is nothing new under the sun, that everything just goes around in circles with no improvement in the human condition.

Burt looked at me with avuncular kindness and a tinge of disbelief. Think about America, he said, even with all its problems, and compare it to how things were a few decades ago. No improvement? What would an African American say about that? Or a Latino? Or Asian? Or a Jew? Or how about anyone from the gay or lesbian community? The present, Burt was telling me, is murky, sure. But: It's not worse than the way things were. It's actually in many important ways better than the way things

were. The present is better than the past. And the future, Burt promised, will be better than the present.

Burt, the atheist Jew, was, at that moment, not just my law professor, but my rabbi, my teacher. For he understood the basic Jewish idea, the most basic Jewish idea: the future will be better.

Well over 1,000 years separate Moses and Rabbi Akiva. Yet, our rabbis crafted a story about the two of them. The scene begins in heaven, and Moses beholds God, who is carefully etching tiny, decorative crowns on the letters of Torah. Many letters in Torah are adorned with these beautiful, little crowns. Moses examines them and asks God about them. What do they mean? God explains to Moses that those crowns are all the interpretations of Torah that one great man will offer, more than a thousand years in the future. “Wow,” says Moses, “Show me this man!”

God instructs Moses to turn around and as he does so, he suddenly finds himself sitting in the back of Rabbi Akiva’s beit midrash, his house of learning. Akiva is in the front of the room, teaching. And Moses, our great law-giver? Is he in the back, shaking his head, clucking, correcting Akiva’s teaching of Torah? Is he thinking, “Oy li! Woe am I, what has happened to the Torah, this great teaching, to God’s word?”

No, Moses is in the back of the room, where the junior scholars used to sit, and he’s depressed. Why? Because *he understood nothing*. It was not that Akiva was speaking a different language. It was that Akiva’s Torah teaching was beyond Moses, over his head. He simply didn’t get it. Torah, yes, even Torah, had progressed to such a degree that even Moshe Rabbeinu himself, Moses, our teacher, had not a clue what Akiva, the Torah teacher of the future, was talking about.

This is not Yeridat ha’Dorot at all! It’s not generational descent; it’s quite the opposite. It’s Aliyat ha’Dorot, the generational ascent. It tells us that our efforts through time will improve things. It tells us that we and our descendants have the capacity, not of falling lower and lower, but of reaching higher and higher, and getting better and better.

Friends, don’t be pessimistic about the future. Remember, we’re Jews. We believe in the future. We believe in a better world, and that history moves forward and upward. We believe in movement and improvement.

Many of us make this central to our religious lives. Tikkun olam, repair of the world, is not just a Reform Jewish catchphrase. No, it’s the bedrock Jewish belief that we can fix our world, make it better. Sure, it takes work; it demands attention. But the whole notion of tikkun olam means that we believe that the future can be better. The world is broken, in need of repair? Of course! The present is messy? Sure! We can make it better? Yes. There is reason to hope? You better believe it.

Every time we do a little act of tikkun, healing of the world or healing of ourselves, we cast a vote for the future. That’s why we are here. We don’t come to Glenbrook High

School just to bow our heads in prayer. We come here to vote for the future. To bring food for the hungry, to draw closer to God, to draw closer to each other, and to promise ourselves that we can make the next year better than the last year. That's the Jewish way.

Those were the days, my friends? Yes, they were. They were good days. Meanwhile, 2011 will turn into 2012. 5771 is now 5772. And the best is yet to come. L'shana tova.