RDM HHD Message

THE CIRCLE AND THE LINE

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Is life a line or a circle? Disney would have us believe that it is a circle, picture the scene in The Lion King, the moment the young Simba is held up by Rafiki for all the animals of Pride Rock to see. I have witnessed many parents strike the same pose with their child at a bris or baby naming.

It's not only Disney of course; the circle, according to mythologist Joseph Campbell, is the most ubiquitous symbol in world religion: Buddhists hold prayer wheels, Moslems circle the Kabbah, and First Nation villages are built in circles. Christianity, with its faith in death and resurrection, is all circles.

In Judaism, you find few circles. Sure the challah of Rosh Hashanah is round, but you do not build an ideology based on baking (no matter how delicious, therefore life is also not “a box of chocolates”, to mix movie metaphors - sorry Forrest Gump).

A more serious study reveals that Jewish tradition rebelled against circles because it perceived the deadly implications of this belief. Life as a circle is closed, its pattern fixed, and nothing new can enter. So Kohelet complained:

"Utter futility!
Only that shall happen, which has happened,
Only that occur, which has occurred;
There is nothing new under the sun!" (Ecclesiastes 1)

Rabbi Ed Feinstein asked, “Can there be a more hopeless idea than human beings, like history, like nature, is bound to repeat itself in endless cycles of war, holocaust, plague and destruction? Can we never learn? Can we never change?” If that were true why come the synagogue, why get out of bed every morning?

My teacher Rabbi Alvin Fine wrote poetically that, “Life is a journey, a going, a growing from stage to stage…” Like life, the Torah's central metaphor is a journey -- the world's greatest road-story.. For the ancient Israelites it was from slavery to freedom, from the House of Bondage to the Promised Land. For each of us we schlep along a similar path, from what constraints us to what enables us.

On Rosh Hashanah we will blow the Shofar and proclaim "Hayom Harat Olam, Today is the world's birthday." 5783 is not starting over, back at the beginning of an endless cycle, it's a new beginning. The opening of the next chapter in the story of our life and our community, in which we play both a leading and a supporting role.

If life is indeed a line then it's more like the heart rate monitor we see in medical dramas, with peaks and valleys, the highs and lows, the joys and oys. But it keeps moving, sometimes back, sometimes forward but with endless possibilities. Whether we, by our efforts and pursuits, have moved the world or ourselves forward toward the promised land, or backward toward slavery, is the ultimate measure and significance of our lives, and the measure of the year that was and the New Year that lays out before us. Forward or backward, but not in circles, which way will you go in this New Year?