When That Big Odometer Changes Over

Steven Wright, my favorite comedian, known for his rather unique view of things shared the following observation, he explained that one night while driving in his car he noticed that his odometer was about to change from 99,999 miles to 100,000 miles, so he pulled over to watch it change.

I'll tell you my big dilemma with the millennium, I am struggling to understand what makes this date, the change of our calendar from 12/31/1999 to 1/1/2000 any more significant or important than the inevitable tick of milage in my car from a 4 digit number to a 5 or 6 digit number. To be specific, the new millennium, which some correctly argue does not actually take effect till January 1, 2001, is not a Jewish issue. Our new year is Rosh Hashannah, which we all knows happens some time in September or October on the second hottest day of the year, the hottest day being of course Yom Kippur. Our next millennium, (we have already experienced five) does not occur for another 240 years or 241 years, I'm really not sure. Perhaps the only overtly Jewish thing about the date January 1, 2000 is that it coincides with the 2000 year anniversary of Jesus' Bris, which occurred eight days after his birth on December 25th. But while Kirt Douglas is correct in asserting that we mark the anniversary of a Bar Mitzvah by celebrating it again on ones 83rd birthday, there is not currently any Jewish ritual to mark the anniversary of one's circumcision, and that's okay with me.

However while the importance of the millennium is somewhat in question to the Jewish community, its significance for the Christian world goes far beyond an odometer change. In Christian theology the new millennium marks the Sabbatical year envisioned by Peter in the Christian Bible. In his view of the creation story, each day

was a thousand years and thus for fundamentalist Christians January 1, 2000 will mark the beginning of the Sabbath of Creation when God's divine program will have been completed. This is why, in many Fundamentalist Christian circles, this date is both one of great trepidation and hope, for in their belief system it will be at this moment that one of two things will occur. Either the new year will bring about the second coming of Jesus and begin his thousand year reign, or in another scenario, the new millennium will bring Jesus's second coming, the resurrection of all humankind, the last judgement and the final delineation of Heaven and Hell. Still a third view of the millennium, in Christian theology is that each of the events I just mentioned will be separated by 1,000 years with the first to occur sometime after January 1, 2000.

Even in non-fundamentalist Christian thinking the new Millennium is an event laden with religious significance and great excitement. As with any New Year, and Rosh Hashannah is no exception, the ticking of the clock and the changing of the calendar from the year past to the year present is an opportunity for retrospection, resolution and in some part redemption. Perhaps not in the Jewish view, redemption by a latter day Prophet or Messiah, but maybe redemption from the trials and struggles of a previous year, century or in this instance Millennium. Salvation in the form of an opportunity for much for the world to participate in one massive act of introspection. A great Heshbone Nefesh, and accounting of the soul of the entire planet as we look back on what we have done and ahead to what we can become.

I have followed, with fascination, the current debate raging in internet chat rooms and editorial pages on who shall be considered the most influential person of the last thousand years, and what event shall be counted as the most significant. It seems

every cable channel, TV network, and national magazine is preparing some kind of list. ESPN has the century's greatest athletes, the History Channel the most influential people of the last thousand years, and Time Magazine of course its annual person of the year which, this year, will feature on its cover, the person of the century.

This particular list, above all the others, causes me to think of this odometer tick as an opportunity for the redemption of our world. Redemption or salvation from the terribly destructive ways of human kind, the evil and violence we have rained down upon the earth and each other in the past 100 or 1,000 years.

Time Magazine is asking who was the most significant person in the last Century and according to early reports, they are contemplating Hitler for their cover page. While I am horrified at the prospect of receiving that magazine in my mail box in a couple of days, I am hopeful for a world that views the attempted Genocide of our people, and the man who endeavored to perpetrate such a heinous crime as the most significant event of the past 100 years. For if it was not, what was? A world that can see through the bright lights of celebrity (Elvis is rumored to be number two on the Time list) and look beyond the glamour of technology (Bill Gates is rumored in the top five) and identify instead the ugly potential of humanity to be inhumane on a global scale as the most significant event of the last decade is a world, in my opinion that stands on the brink of addressing the greatest threat to humanities continued existence, man's inhumanity to man. Only when we realize our failures and faults, can we begin to try and fix them, repair the damage we have done. If it takes Hitler on the cover of a magazine and the celebration of a new millennium for us to do that then so be it.

To mark the passage of time, even by a calendar that is not, at its essence, a Jewish calendar is very much part of the Jewish tradition. Indeed I believe that to mark the passage of time, to stop and note where we have been, where are going and where we, as a individuals, a community, a nation, a people, are at this particular moment in time is the very essence of Jewish practice and tradition. The entire system of Jewish practice from daily blessings, weekly Sabbaths, to yearly holidays, to life cycle celebrations is all about taking stock at life's most important and transitional moments. The coming new year, Jewish or not most be counted as one of those moments.

I received a fascinating e-mail early in the week about winter solstice that will occur this Wednesday, December 22nd. By an amazing combination of events and circumstances the winter solstice that will take place in just a few days will feature a view of the moon larger than has ever occurred in our lifetime, a view of the moon unique to this century. The moon will appear 14% larger than a usual full moon and will be so bright that, if the weather is clear, people who live in snow covered climates, will not even need headlights to drive at night. On this once in a century event, the tides will be exceptionally high and low; the highest in your lifetime other than during storms. The deer, antelope and bears will be out feeding that night. They will feel a little extra frisky. The fish in the sea will be active, too. As will birds, reptiles, insects and probably even the smallest microbial earth creatures. It will be a most amazing night, perhaps the most amazing ever. To the entire natural world, the moon's glow will outshine the drop of the crystal ball in New York a few days later. But these creatures will not know why. Only humans have the ability to understand the workings of their world, only we can reason the significance of this once in a lifetime moment and

take advantage of it. On December 21, 1866, when this event last occurred the Lakota Sioux Tribe took advantage of this combination of occurrences and extremely bright night and staged a devastating retaliatory ambush on soldiers in the Wyoming Territory, hundreds were killed because of an opportunity.

Now 133 years later when human kind has the opportunity again, how will me make use of it. Now 1,000 years after the last millennium celebration that was marked by religious crusades and bloodshed in the name of religious fervor, how will we make use of the opportunity presented to us?

The turning of an old century not a new, the changing of the calendar year from 1999 to 2000 is significance, it is more significant than the change of our odometer, but only if we recognize it for the unique opportunity it provides. The New York Times reports that 70% of US Citizens are staying home on New Years Eve, perhaps out of fear of Y2K, perhaps out of a desire to be near family at this historic moment. But when the moment passes, when the champagne is exhausted, when Times Square returns to just another busy intersection in a city full of busy intersections, what will remain? What will we be able to say we did with that unique moment in time. I hope that we used it to take stock of our world and the things we can do to help it make it to the next millennium, the next century. I hope that we perform Heshbone HaNefesh and examine our soul and the soul of our planet. I hope we learn from the examples of the bad and the evil as well as the good and I hope most of all that we celebrate every day of our lives like it was the millennium, full of thanksgiving, full of hope, guided by the lessons learned from our past and full of the promise of tomorrow. May this be our blessing.