

Late December 2010

Dear friends,

I have never been a fan of New Year's resolutions. They remind me of watered down self-examinations similar to our internal assessments we make on the High Holy Days but without the spiritual content. We resolve at this time of year in a secular way and then have a drink (or frankly drinks) to celebrate the plans we've resolved to put into play. We resolve to lose weight, to cut back on our excesses, to be more attentive to aging parents – all good things but almost always self-focused. So as I pondered on what to share with you today I decided to do something different and you can resolve to deal with it or not.

I'm sharing with you some quotes from a few books of mine that have made me stop and think as I've encountered them. I hope that you will resolve to just think about them sometime during 2011. I know that tonight is not the night to try these out unless you're spending the evening with an unusual group of people. But as with all my letters, you are in charge of what you do with them.

I begin with a brief essay by Rabbi David J. Wolpe from his book *Floating Tales of Faith: Ancient Wisdom for a Modern World*. It's called *Writing Our Own Torah*.

Jewish law enjoins each individual to write a *Sefer Torah*. This injunction applies 'even if your parents have bequeathed one to you.' We are not to write the *Sefer Torah* in order to possess one physically. We are enjoined not to own a Torah, but rather to write one.

Our lives are parchment, our deeds the words. At each moment we determine the style and content of the scroll. Our masterworks are written in deeds; even those who write for a living must find their inspiration and guidance in life.

If we aim high, we can inspire to write a Torah with our lives. When Rabbi Eliezer the Great died, the Talmud tells us, as he was buried, the mourners said, "a Torah scroll is hidden away." His life was so perfect an embodiment of the ideals of our tradition that it was as if he had become a Torah. To some are given the talent and training to write a Torah scroll on parchment. To all of us is it given to write a sacred story against the backdrop of our lives.

My next quote to think about is from Abraham Joshua Heschel in the delightful book of his writings entitled: *I Asked for Wonder : A Spiritual Anthology edited by Samuel H. Dresner*. It is entitled: *Youth*.

'What message have you for young people?' asked Carl Stern of NBC in concluding a television interview with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel shortly before his death.

Rabbi Heschel replied '... Let them remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power,

and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments.

And, above all, (let them) remember...to build a life as if it were a work of art.'

I now share a quote from Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in the new Lawrence Kushner book: *I'm God You're Not: Observations on Organized Religion & Other Disguises of the Ego*. This paragraph is pulled from the introduction to the book which includes Kushner's explanation of why he wrote about the dissatisfaction so many feel in their religious lives.

*Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, arguably the smartest Jew of this generation echoes this same theme. 'Jewish thought pays little attention to inner tranquility and peace of mind...The very concept of the Divine as infinite implies an activity that is endless, of which one must never grow weary.' Indeed, Steinsaltz continues, "The Jewish approach to life considers the man who has stopped going (on) – he who has a feeling of completion, of peace, of a great light from above that has brought him to rest – to be someone who has lost his way.'*

Religions require engagement and so we realistically never can reach our hoped for nirvana, the place of completion, because the world is always in flux. One day we think we "get it" and the next day the understanding we were so certain of becomes flawed. That's the point of commentary. That's the point of story. We are given the right direction but the journey and search never ends. There are endless choices to make and endless resources to use. To be part of a religious tradition that has lasted thousands of years makes it obvious that change has happened and will continue to happen. We have a choice to help steer the boat on its journey or sit in the comfortable seat of tradition and watch the weight of the non-seekers stop us in our tracks. Our choice – not God's.

I close with two quotes to ponder for the new year:

"We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey." - Stephen Covey.

"Know what's weird? Day by day, nothing seems to change, but pretty soon... everything's different." - Gary Watterson writing as Calvin in the magical cartoon strip *Calvin and Hobbes*

Let's see what we can wrestle with in 2011 since we know we must never stop learning ...but it is our choice as to what we pursue...

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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