

Dear Friends,

The rabbis at my boyhood *yeshiva* considered celebrating the beginning of the secular New Year to be just as *trayf* as trimming a tree for Christmas. As Hanukka was touted to be superior to Christmas – eight nights as opposed to one, and mighty Judah compared to paunchy Santa – so Rosh HaShana was held up to be the solemn and proper alternative to the marking a new year. But my secular parents welcomed the arrival of January 1 with a bang. The party was always at our house in South Philly in the kitchen behind the family candy store where two dozen relatives – adult cousins, and aunts and uncles – would cram together wearing funny hats to drink – Cherry Heering and Chivas Regal for the men and screwdrivers for the women – to sound horns and rattle noise-makers, and to watch the ball drop in Times Square on the portable TV while shouting out the descending seconds in unison with the rest of the world, so it seemed to me. Indeed, New Year’s Eve was the only time in the year that I felt complete solidarity with our neighbors. For the other 364 days, we Jews were aliens both religiously and culturally to the people on our block, but on December 31, we were all part of the universal hope that comes with removing the old well-marked wall calendar of a year lived and replacing it with a new blank one with all its possibilities.

Anticipating the New Year, last Friday night I began services with an editorial from the January 1, 2014 edition of *The New York Times*, which concluded: “The dead of winter is not a natural season for rebirth. Yet all of nature, dormant now, is preparing for a re-emergence that always seems spectacular when it eventually comes. Meanwhile, we persist, as much like ourselves on January 1 as we were on December 31. The newness we hope for is something that is ours to construct day by day.” In the second reading of the evening, astrophysicist, Carl Sagan, challenged us further by placing the entire cosmos in our hands. “*We* are the custodians of life’s meaning. We long for a Parent to care for us, to forgive us our errors, to save us from our childish mistakes. But knowledge is preferable to ignorance. Better by far to embrace the hard truth than a reassuring fable. If we crave some cosmic purpose, then let us find ourselves a worthy goal.” In the third reading, the poet, Mary Oliver, asked us to turn to ourselves. After hearing the tug of so many voices, Oliver speaks of a new voice “which you slowly / recognize as your own, / that keeps you company / as you stride deeper and deeper / into the world, / determined to do / the only thing you can do, / determined to save / the only life you can save,” that is, yours.

So, my friends, welcome to 2019 in which I trust you will feel ‘the newness of hope,’ search for ‘some cosmic purpose,’ with the possibility of personal salvation in self-discovery to benefit yourself in order to do what must be done for others. May the year be one of insight, of accomplishment and of peace with a good measure of happiness, too.

Wishing you the best,

*Lee*