

## The End or Beginning of the World

The answer to the question as to whether this is the beginning or end of the world is unknowable and probably not worth even asking. Some answers are here on terra firma for all of us to ponder, and others reside in heaven for us never to know the answer to or to find out at a later time.

Scientists claim to be able to tell us what the universe was like 1/10,000 of a second after the Big Bang, but they cannot be sure of the weather tomorrow. Whether science can respond to the inquiry as to whether this is the beginning or end of the world depends upon each person's perspective. Einstein famously wrote that "G-d doesn't play dice with the universe," meaning that certain inimitable laws of physics control our material world. Yet at the end of his life, Einstein wrote in a way that showed little trust in the concept of divine intellect. The greatest mind, perhaps of all time, did not know if we were at the end or the beginning, but I would wager a few beers that he viewed man's search as only in the initial stages of development.

Doubtless, the story is well known of the father who had two sons. The sons were extremely privileged, but one was an optimist and one was a pessimist. No matter what toys or new possessions the father bought his pessimistic son, the son was capable of seeing the negative side. As an experiment, the father bought the optimistic son a pile of horse dung. The boy was full of glee, saying "with this much horse dung, there must be a pony around somewhere."

My wife is fond of saying to me "attitude is everything." I have come to the conclusion that while "attitude" may not be everything, it is about 99% of life's secret. The rest of life is about control over time. Time is the only real commodity that we have, and with it we can start the world or end it. An old Jewish adage has it that the Messiah will only return to the world once it has been perfected. "The Messiah will walk the path which is paved with the good deeds of others." This is in contradistinction to the view of some Evangelical Christians that the Messiah will only return when the world is in such a dilapidated state that salvation is the only answer.

Needless to say, I subscribe to the former tradition. I was raised in the belief that good will triumph and the righteous will prevail so long as there are people working earnestly. I doubt that message virtually every day when I read the newspapers and talk to all of the glum people around me. The threat of nuclear proliferation, the gap between rich and poor, and the state of the world in constant warfare is enough to turn anyone into a pessimist. The glass certainly seems half empty at the current time. Yet, dismay and discouragement will only make our situation worse.

The beginning of the world will only be initiated by one small mitzvah at a time. The Jewish notion of mitzvah is not about “good deeds” as is often thought to be the case, but rather the obligation to perform certain acts or refrain from others, the fulfillment of which enhances our status as children of Hashem.

The Chassadic masters teach that the world is a vessel which has been broken. The job of each human being is to gather the sparks and put them back into a new vessel of our own creation. The vessel of creation will be different for each of us. For some it may be making music, and for others simply raising children. Regardless of what vessel we build for ourselves, the individual effort in gathering the sparks is bound to light the world, or at least some small dark corner of this planet. The whole of my culture and being teaches that even under the most arduous of circumstances, we have an obligation to gather those glowing embers that, in reality, surround us.

My theme is not whether the world is at the beginning or the end, or whether it is even possible to answer such a patently absurd question in the first place. The question is whether we can move down the continuum from the beginning to a later point on the spectrum of time in a way that is positive and inspirational.

I once confessed to a friend of mine who had lost a loved one how inadequate I believed myself to be with respect to a showing of nurturing and emotion over the loss that my friend had suffered. He explained to me that even a word or a pat on the back was meaningful. “The very fact that people say something or do something, no matter how minor, shows an interest that people who have suffered a loss thirst to hear and to feel.” While the spark may be small, providing that sort of support is important beyond simple explanation.

Although I protest the irrelevancy of the question concerning whether this is the beginning or the end of the world, I nevertheless expect to continue to be as productive as I can while exploring that often dark and foreboding corridor that leads to the next chamber. I do not know if at the end of the hallway there will be a beginning or an end, but I do believe that an effort to be productive on behalf of others is worthwhile.

My old friend Rabbi Maklouf Portal used to tell an interesting story. Rabbi Portal was born in Morocco in the Jewish ghetto of Marrakesh. He lived with Muslims before he ever knew a Christian, and suffered a bloody skull one day for refusing to utter the words “Allah is great.” So grateful was Rabbi Portal when he came to the United States that before he even knew our culture or language he enlisted in the United States Army, where he served abroad in Germany. Rabbi Portal told a story of twins inside a mother’s womb. The one twin said that it would be terrible when they came out. “We do not get all of this food, lest we make a tremendous effort; we will be hot or cold and we will have to cry for attention.” The other twin said, “I think it is going to be terrific. We will get

to be independent and we will be surrounded by love and joy as we grow.” Both twins were anxious about what faced them, and both could have been right depending upon the circumstances into which they were born and the DNA with which they were created.

I often think of Rabbi Portal’s story when trying to predict the future. Sometimes matters turn out very differently than we plan. “Man plans and G-d laughs,” goes the old Yiddish saying.

Beginnings or endings are unimportant. It is, after all, the journey and not the destination which counts. According to the diary which Judge Muir bought for me when I left the clerkship in federal court, “Happiness is not a state you arrive at, But a manner of traveling.” How true, and it is for that reason that the question of beginnings or endings makes so little difference.

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cc: Morgan Myers, Editor  
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