

Editorial

A "Happy" New Year?

The beginning of the Hebrew Year 5,740 is just around the corner, but this editorial is not written for sentimental reasons usually associated with such an event. We, as a beleaguered profession might extract useful lessons from the long history of the Jewish people, who often had to survive under adverse conditions. The parochial event of Rosh Hashanah may thus be of direct significance for us all.

The Advent of the Jewish new year is altogether different than the beginning of a civil year. Rather than engage in frivolous and gay celebrations with drinking and music, in an attempt to drown the anxiety which is commonly associated with important stations in time, Jews stop for solemn self reflection, for taking stock and for assessing the need to correct deviations from the desired course of life.

The ten day period beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is known as "the days of awe." These days stand out as high peaks in the plateau of time, since the fate of every man, woman and child is supposedly being sealed for the coming year by the Lord on High. "Who shall live, and who shall die, who shall come to a timely end, and who shall come to an untimely end, who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by beasts, who by hunger and who by thirst, who shall be at ease, and who shall wander about, who shall be at peace and who shall be molested, who shall have comfort and who shall be tormented, who shall become poor and who shall become rich, who shall be lowered and who shall be raised."

These are "days of awe" for Medicine also. Decisions are passed down daily from Washington and Lansing, from union headquarters and from insurance company suites that directly encroach upon our professional life space. It behooves our profession also to stop for awhile and reflect upon our position and where we are heading. Economically, physicians do well these days, no less so than at any other time in the past, in spite of governmental harrassment and many limitations upon our freedom to make independent decisions. Technically, many reasons exist for self-congratulation, since progress in every field of medicine gives patients a better chance than ever to obtain competent and specific treatment. Patients are more likely now to get well if that is possible, or at least to have their suffering minimized. But, the position of the physician in society, his prestige and the respect that is accorded him, is greatly reduced even when compared with the not too distant past.

Bureaucrats and consumer advocates routinely treat our competence with frivolous disdain and repeatedly override our professional judgments. In the struggle to survive under such conditions many seem to have lost the deeper satisfactions of being a physician, the sense of importance of our calling and the joy of being chosen by society to bear a special trust, the right to make important life and death decisions.



DR. BAR-LEVAV

In the struggle to survive under such conditions many seem to have lost the deeper satisfaction of being a physician, the sense of importance of our calling and the joy of being chosen by society to bear a special trust, the right to make important life and death decisions.

Although a naive and child-like innocence permeates the picture of God, sitting exalted on his throne as he metes out justice to every creature, it does not inhibit Man from trying to influence the heavenly decisions and to cancel the stern decrees. Although "all mankind passes before Thee like a flock of sheep, and thou doest count and number thy creatures, fixing their life time and inscribing their destiny," apathy and inaction are nonetheless unjustified. Repentance, prayer and charity have the power to cancel stern decrees. Even though relatively powerless in the final analysis, Man nevertheless is obligated to actively attempt to modify and influence his fate.

Physicians may do well to follow this example. The will to preserve the historical dignity and the professional status of physician, is often weakened in the face of the avalanche of decrees that are daily heaped upon us. But, we cannot afford many more retreats without becoming, as a group, just highly-paid hirelings, like the postal workers. Even independent truckers will then have more to say about their work than we would.

Beyond the age of innocence the wish for a "happy new year" is merely a delusional statement. The simple words of the Rosh Hashanah prayer make better sense: "May all thy people be remembered and inscribed in the book of life and blessing, peace and prosperity."

And, may it be a year of good health.

R. Pan-Lerman M.D.