With its emphasis on introspection and action, Yom Kippur is a fitting way to celebrate the turn of the millennium.

Small and affirmative steps

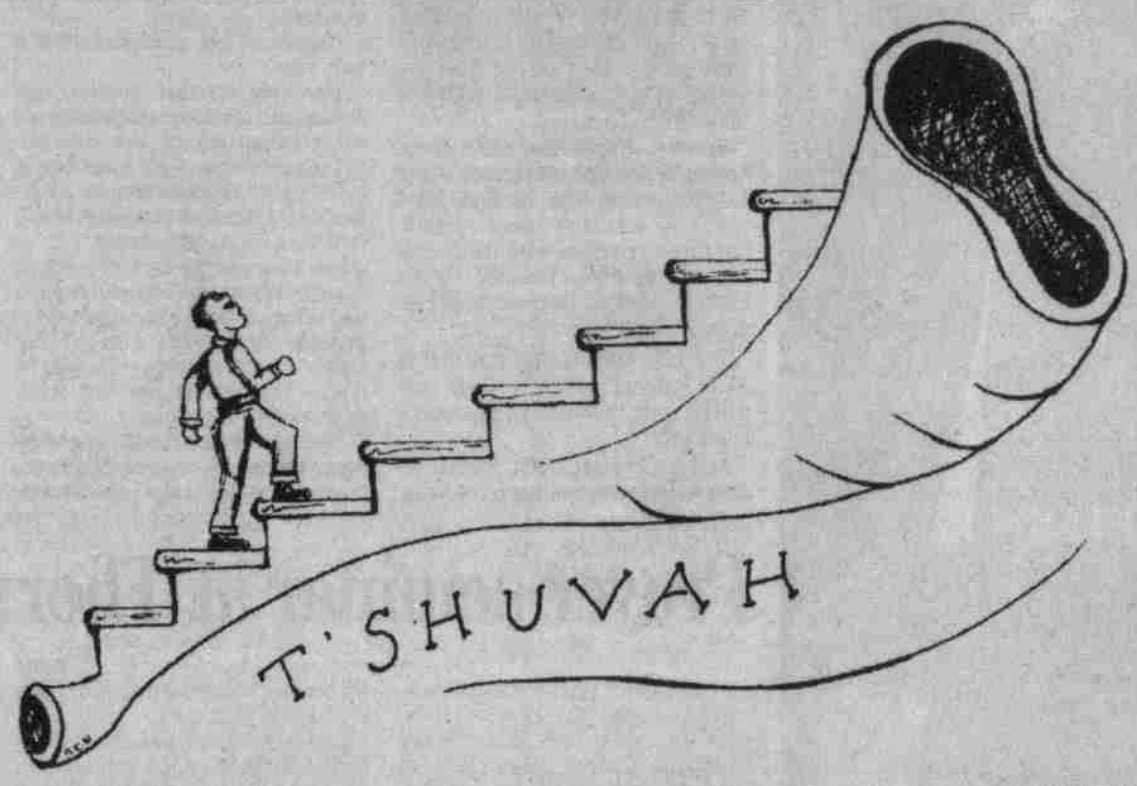
By Rabbi Saul J. Berman and Jesse Cogan

All passages of life — a new year, a wedding, a bar/bat mitzvah, a confirmation or a circumcision — focus on one hope: change.

But if the popular fever surrounding the millennium is any indication, the internal change Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur demand is far different from the changes anticipated by the turn in the solar calendar. Not just because loud extravaganzas are different from solemn synagogue ritual, or because the squeals of thousands of party horns are so unlike the inspiring sounds of the shofar. But because of two very different ways to look at change.

Does change happen suddenly, all at once, destined and determined by forces out of our control? Or is it a deliberate process, the result of self-examination, a step-by-step modification of thought and action? Is it a radical upheaval, shaking the very essence of our beliefs and principles? Or is it incremental, a process, an act of courage? Is it Armageddon or the Israel-Arab peace talks? Y2K or forgiving a friend? Does it happen to you or do you make it happen?

Before we all attend this biggest of parties, let's dress ourselves in the best souls we have.



ANN KOFFSKY

On the High Holy Days, Jews celebrate the birth of the world — an imperfect world filled with hunger, war and violence, where earthquakes wreak havoc and sinister, menacing leaders reign, where corruption is expected and immorality is condoned and even our schoolchildren fear for their lives. Relationships strain, feelings get hurt and communication breaks down. The world is so imperfect that often we question its Maker.

In this sobering milieu, Jews look inward and take a slow, difficult journey. What are my weaknesses? What small but significant commitment can I make to counter them? What can I control, inside myself, that will make a difference? As an individual, as a Jew, as a people, as a citizen of the world.

The turn of the millennium produces complex, mixed emotions. On the one hand, it reflects the fear of disconnecting from the past. On the other hand, it reflects the hope for the future that might come with that disconnection. The Days of Awe, however, ask that we look behind to find comfort for tomorrow. We exalt a forgiving, compassionate, perfect God who has put our forefathers and us through unspeakable tribulations yet shepherded our people through the millenniums.

We remind Him how we so flagrantly sinned at Sinai but were nevertheless forgiven. We sound the ram's horn in awe of the moment and as a promise to change.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur stand alone in the Jewish calendar as holidays with no association to the agricultural celebrations of sowing and reaping. Nevertheless, Yom Kippur is definitely a day of *simcha*, of celebration. The joy Jews celebrate during this period is unlike the joys of the natural change of the seasons; it is a joy we make happen to ourselves.

Judaism as practiced today must take a serious, objective look at itself without allowing friction from within, outside cultural values, or anxiety over social acceptance to dictate the steps it must take. With strict adherence to Jewish law, we can and should make small but effective changes to stop criminal and unethical behavior in our community, to provide new and safer conditions for all women and to empower people to discover spiritual meaning in their productive lives.

Thankfully, the slow road to change is not ours alone. It is shared by thousands of Christians, serious about their milestone and undaunted by the hullabaloo of extremists who point to everything from the end of the world to the end of the Jewish people. Christianity, too, should take this opportunity for introspection. We can't expect thousands of years of history to turn into sudden bliss on January first. But we can expect commitment to small, effective steps that will ultimately lead to real change.

Perhaps this year, as millions upon millions plan to celebrate the millennium, the message of the High Holidays ought to be considered by all people. After all, to ride your hopes only on having the wildest party in history world would be a lost opportunity for the entire world.

Rabbi Berman is associate professor of Jewish Studies at Stern College and adjunct professor at Columbia University School of Jewish Law. Jesse Cogan is a creative and marketing strategist with a specialty in the Jewish community.

Kean could achieve great things in Senate

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

Gov. Christie Whitman's announcement that she will not be a candidate for U.S. senator after all has again prompted speculation that Citizen Kean will return to the public arena. Thomas H. Kean, that is, former governor of New Jersey, current president of Drew University, chairman of the Carnegie Corporation, board member of leading corporations.

This is not the first time the name of the man who gave the state its sense of identity and changed the standard against which its politicians are measured has been mentioned for senator. He has declined to run several times before. When asked while serving as governor of New Jersey, Kean decided, like Whitman, he could not adequately serve the people who had entrusted him with the state's highest office and be a full-time candidate for another office. When asked the second time, he had been at Drew too short a time to achieve goals he had set for the institution.

Kean said no again in 1996, influenced perhaps by the record number of public servants he admired who were stepping down, and bothered by the increasing tide of negative ads.

Is there anything in the political climate as 2000 approaches that might entice this citizen politician back into public service? There certainly is.

First, opportunities to serve in the Senate don't present themselves all that often, even and perhaps especially to people of extraordinary ability. With so many professional politicians competing to attain the next rung on the ladder, the citizen politician must ask himself if he could achieve in the post what others might not and whether this is the arena in which he can render his most useful service.

In a time when the public is tired of partisan bickering, Kean enjoys wide support among New Jerseyans of all persuasions and wide appeal across the state's diverse electorate. This would give him the necessary leverage to work with a small but impressive number of senators, Republican and Democrat, to resolve pressing matters such as the future of Social Security. Added to the equation would be the strength of a new administration about to enter its honeymoon period.

Second, several issues Kean addressed as governor have become national in scope. As a senator, he would bring to them an expertise rarely seen among first-time legislators.

Education? Under Kean, New Jersey was the first state to offer alternative paths to teacher certification, bringing some of the brightest college graduates into its classrooms. It was among the first to offer merit pay to teachers and public-school choice to parents. Kean backed bond issues to spur cooperation between high technology, industry and education, and he brought Rutgers into deserved national attention as an outstanding research and teaching institution.

The former N.J. governor has expertise on education and other key issues of national interest.

Throughout his governorship, education was his highest priority. It is now the American people's.

Environment? Kean took New York City to federal court when it refused to stop dumping raw sewage into the Hudson River. He fought to clean up toxic waste sites across the state.

Quality of life? Kean set aside millions of acres in open space and preserved wetlands. He was the guiding force behind the New Jersey Center for the Performing Arts in Newark.

In ability, name recognition, popularity and many other measures, Kean stands head and shoulders above the rest. He could achieve great things in Washington.

Alvin S. Felzenberg served as assistant secretary of state in the Kean administration.

A brief and painful wish list toward the reform of our schools

By Theodore L. Gaillard Jr.

Did you know that Brazil is the capital of Argentina? Or that Iraq lies directly across the Mediterranean from the coast of Switzerland?

Two typical answers from a diagnostic geography quiz I gave to incoming 10th-grade modern European history students. And a book I reviewed for this paper mentioned that an American submarine had sunk in a training exercise in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Peru. Where did that author go to school?

This is what tax dollars buy from our nation's school systems, Philadelphia's included.

That diagnostic quiz reflects the state of our public education, a system snickered at by the rest of the industrialized world.

Solutions? There are no easy answers. But let's at least start serious discussion. Consider:

Funding public school systems ($10,000 minimum per student) with a raise in state income taxes. Scrap local property-tax sources — and eliminate real estate inequities that provide excellent funding in Radnor (more than $10,500 per student) and inadequate resources for local Philadelphia schools in a continuing cycle that imprisons each district in its pre-established economic cell. (Meanwhile, parents who demand decent education for their children often move to the suburbs or pay many times the going rate — perhaps $2,000 in annual school property taxes, plus an extra $11,000 to send their child to a private school.)

Replacing local school boards with regional, state-appointed professional panels. Too often school board members in particular districts do not have experience appropriate for sound educational judgments for shaping the lives of the next generation.

Instituting state competency exams at the end of Eighth and 12th grades. New York State has its Regents' Exam. (And France has its rigorous *baccalaureat.*) Didn't pass? Repeat the grade. End "social promotion": non-passing students repeat, strengthening skills needed for success in the following grades and avoiding the burden of unnecessary review for other students in next year's classes.

Hiring more teachers and building new classrooms. Cap class size at 20. Allow teachers to *teach* instead of dole out discipline. Small classes permit every student to participate in discussion, allow teachers to assign and evaluate frequent writing exercises so students can learn how to organize, write, and revise a cohesive and persuasive essay.

Hiring only teachers who have majored in their subject area. And expect their standardized test scores to rank at least in the upper half. (Is it too much to require our teachers to have strong backgrounds in their subjects?)

Forget vouchers. Let's fix the system first and keep our promises to our children.

Putting at least one computer in every classroom. Train students how to use them — for word-processing, finding information on the Internet, organizing data for science and history reports.

Enforcing strong minimum core requirements for graduation. For starters: computer proficiency, 4 years of English (writing and literature), 3 years (through at least Geometry and Algebra II) of math, one full year of art, 2 years of history (World and U.S.), 2 years of a foreign language, 2 years (some countries require 4) of lab science.

Requiring community service. In the self-focused teenage years, preparation for adulthood includes developing the ability to care for others, to identify with one's community.

Linking local schools with local businesses. Require students in appropriate courses to conduct forays into the "real world" to gather and analyze information for course-related projects. Tap these businesses for leaders willing to visit schools, speak at assembly, provide vacation internship opportunities.

Mandating uniforms. More schools are requiring them — to minimize classroom clothing competition, foster academic focus, and save money and time for both parents and students.

Our industries spend $25 billion per year retraining workers with poor math and English skills. As Robert Kaplan reported in a recent Atlantic magazine, in today's high-technology job market it seems "far more cost-efficient to import the rest of the world's talent than to train citizens at home, especially when weak national education standards and low taxes have ruined many local schools."

Vouchers? A stopgap measure at best. First, let's fix the system.

Theodore L. Gaillard, Jr. is a writer based in Philadelphia.

Tomorrow: Jane R. Eisner on the Miss America pageant; Medical mistakes; A mayor for the arts.

From the World's Pages

Got culture?

One hears a lot about America's lack of culture. Nonsense! Who are all those countless bookstores for? Many hundreds of thousands of CDs with music for any taste are stuffed into enormous pavilions that are hard to call "stores." Would you like a recording of a concert from the tail end of the 1940s by the legendary pianist Sofronitsky? Here it is! Would you like Richter, Gilels or Rachmaninoff himself? Go for it! Everything ... is here. Just pay up....This year in the capital — the one famous for the Monica Lewinsky scandal — Americans dedicated a memorial to Russia's own Alexander Pushkin. In Moscow, by the way, I did not find any memorial to William Faulkner nor even to the English-speaking William Shakespeare, whose works have been a staple of the Moscow theaters for the past 100 years.

Mikhail Kozakov
Ogonyok (Moscow), July 26



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.