

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Yizkor

5774

As I told you during Rosh Hashanah, last month I traveled to Argentina with Abby for my nephew's bar mitzvah, which took place in a Conservative synagogue in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. The rabbi, a former student of mine, surprised his congregation during his dvar Torah with the following question:

Would you like to know your future?

Divrei Torah in Argentina are, depending on the rabbi, somewhat informal and participatory. So, encouraged by the rabbi to ponder the question, many of the 250 people in attendance started raising their hands.

Would you like to know your future?

Timidly, I half raised my hand. I always wanted to know my future. Did I? I wasn't so sure, so as timidly as I have raised my hand, I began lowering it.

I remember that, while growing up in Argentina, there lived on our block a family of Roma (we called them Gypsies, or *gitanos* in Spanish.) I remember walking home from the bus with my brother and being called by an old lady from the "Gypsy" house: "Guapo (handsome one), do you want me to tell you your future?"

My mother had warned us never to approach the house or talk to the people who lived there. Being the product of a middle class, Jewish family in Argentina, I inherited my share of prejudices towards other minorities, the same way the majority of the non-Jewish population inherited their share of prejudices towards me. Gypsies are liars, cheaters, and child kidnappers, I was told, so be careful. Little did I know then that their ancestors and my ancestors were hoarded together in cattle cars and taken to Auschwitz, Majdanek and Treblinka. But this, I guess, is for another story.

In any event, I wasn't told my future when I was a child, and later on when I grew up, my mother's aversion to fortune-tellers in general, and Gypsies in particular,

was still fresh in my mind, and prevented me from worrying too much about what the future had in store for me.

I remember asking my mother a while ago: Mommy, were you ever interested in knowing the future?

She actually confessed that there was an aspect of the future, a piece of information, she always wanted to know, and that is the six winning numbers of the lottery. I told her that if she ever finds out what the numbers are, to please call me in advance, and then I dropped the subject.

More recently - actually during the years since we moved to New York - I have been exposed to a proliferation of psychics, especially in Manhattan, who advertise their services, but I have never showed any interest in them or given the subject any further thought.

However, during our recent two-day summer pilgrimage to Asbury Park, I saw a palm-reader on the boardwalk advertising her services for ten dollars; I started playing with the idea of finding out my future.

How would it feel to enter the booth, to offer my palm to the psychic, to gaze at the Tarot cards? I was actually attracted by her crystal ball - I always wanted to have a crystal ball although I am not sure what I would do with it.

Now, as you might accurately guess, in the end, I didn't enter the booth, I didn't gaze at the cards, and ultimately, I didn't find out my future, although I did save the ten dollars.

What made me decide not to consult the psychic? Why didn't I go in, even if just to satisfy my curiosity?

I guess that there isn't just one answer.

To begin with, my mother's admonition was still fresh in my mind.

Second, the credentials of the Asbury Park boardwalk psychic were not very convincing.

Third, and how could I have forgotten this? There is an explicit prohibition in the Torah against divination: "*There shall not be found among you ...an enchanter, an observer of times, one who uses divination, or a soothsayer, nor a charmer, a*

or – the six winning numbers of the lottery.

Lotto is a proper name. It is the name of a lottery held in NY. You cannot say "the Lotto" any more than you can say "the Manes."

This has to be "wouldn't" because you're describing something not real – a fantasy. "Didn't" refers to something that actually happened. "I didn't mind being told the winning numbers" means that you were actually told the winning numbers and that you didn't object to receiving that information. I suspect that never actually happened. ☺

medium or a necromancer" (Deuteronomy 18:10-11). Silvia commented later on that a passerby would have been really surprised seeing a rabbi with his kippah and tzitzit (yes, I wear my kippah and tzitzit when I go on vacation) visiting the psychic booth.

Fourth, and this is a biggie, I wouldn't mind being told the six winning numbers of the lottery, but I have always been a little apprehensive, to say it mildly, of being told about bad things that could happen to me or to my loved ones in the future. If the psychic was not going to describe for me a rosy future (and I was no psychic to know it), I didn't want to hear it.

Finally, I didn't want to pay the ten dollars.

But there is, I believe, a deeper, more important reason why I didn't go, and I will never go, into a psychic's booth to hear someone foretelling my future, and that is that I believe that my future -and your future - hasn't been written yet.

Yes, on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, but there is always repentance, prayer and charity to avert the severity of the decree. Even if God knows my future - after all, God knows everything, He granted me the freedom to change it. As Rabbi Akiva taught in one of the best known Jewish philosophical paradoxes: *"Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given"* (Avot 3:19).

I believe that nobody can know my future, because my future will be written tomorrow. Nobody can know how you will turn out because it is up to you!

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin from the Israel Center of Conservative Judaism, surprised me recently with the following question:

Do you know what the difference is, she asked, between our forefathers and us, between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and you and me?

I guess they were great and we are not? I suggested.

No, she said. The difference is that they cannot change their stories, and we can. Their stories are already written, and year after year our forefathers will do the same things: Abraham will keep sending Hagar and Ishmael away, Jacob will be tricked again by his father-in-law, and Esau will hate Jacob. But you and I can rewrite our stories, or at least we can change their endings.

It is not by coincidence that we have many moments during the year, many rituals, and many biblical passages that deal with the past, with the imperative to remember the past: remember what Amalek did to you, you shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and four times a year we ask God to remember our loved ones who departed this physical world.

Zachor, Vezacharta, Yizkor...

We are the People of the Book. For us, Jews, the past is a well-known book where everything is written. The future, however, is more like a blank composition notebook for us to write in it.

Yes, we look at the past for inspiration, for wisdom, for collective memories, but not to be locked into our future.

In a few hours, we will read the book of Jonah. As with our forefather's stories, this story too is written down, and inexorably Jonah will do the same, year after year: He will be given a mission; he will run away, he will find himself in the midst of a storm, and the sailors will throw him overboard. He will be swallowed by a large fish and he will pray to God from the depth of the fish.

However, unlike other biblical stories, the story of Jonah is a story of second chances. Our sages, in their wisdom, selected a reading for Yom Kippur to remind all of us, while the most sacred day of the Jewish calendar is fading away, that second chances, and third and fourth chances are always available, even for Jonah, even for the people of Nineveh, and it goes without saying, for all of us.

Would I like to know my future?

Actually, no. But even if I wanted to, nobody would be able to tell me what the future will bring for me, because it is up to me to write it.

In blatant defiance to the words of Unetane Tokef, which I cherish so much, I affirm today in front of God, and in front of all of you, that no divine writing, no heavenly seal, will prevent me from writing the best pages yet in the book of my life, nobody will stop me from becoming who I ought to be!

As we remember our loved ones who preceded us in the way of life, as we cherish the memories of those who nurtured us, of those who helped us write our life

stories, we ask you, our God and God of our mothers and fathers, to give us faith to believe that that best pages in the books of our lives are yet to be written.

And because we rely on Your infinite love, merciful Father, we have the audacity to request from You an open future, one filled with beautiful blank pages, for us to write in them the best stories yet of our lives.

L'Shanah P'tucha Tikatevu Ve-techatemu. May all of us be blessed with an open year to fill it, with God's help, with kindness, compassion, goodness, sweetness, and love.

Amen