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How the Jewish New Year can change our world

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Race riots. Violent military insurgencies across the globe. The overwhelming impact of widespread new media. Is this the sixties? Nope. Welcome to the second decade of the new millennium. It is now reaching its midpoint, and, as I tell my college students, we are blessed (in the academically neutral sense) to live in interesting times. The nineties, full of Clintonesque breeziness, seem now like some long gone Shangr-ila. Undergraduates are coming of age in a world in conflict.

Here at home, in so many American suburbs, the sheer dropping out of the middle class has forged a tension among families that makes all politics and economics “glocal.” The world stage of conflict is reflected in uncertainty on the home front. We Americans, sheltered from the global storm for so much of our history due to geography, wealth, and a kind of smug isolationism, are now, whether we like it or not, connected to the rest of the world.

Our loss of manufacturing, the targeting of our citizens by rogue youth-filled Middle Eastern militias, the outburst of festering racial frustrations with law enforcement, the relentless influence of social media, all add up to a universe that is at once unnerving and always on the brink of some new tipping point towards one extreme or another.

And that extremism is reflected in our own American way. Look at America’s political life. Where’s the center? Look at our economic life. Where’s the middle class?

It’s time for some new thinking. It’s time to re-imagine what government and citizens can do together to create social change.

It happens to be the Jewish New Year of Rosh HaShanah this week , so some suggested resolutions are in order.

First off, consider a Presidential approach less infatuated with its own ongoing sense of helplessness. The Republicans may be extremists, but they are not totally wrong to charge that Executive Orders bypassing Congress are not the most democratic form of Executive leadership. President Obama needs to move past his blaming of others and assert some overarching vision before his tenure is complete. Otherwise his legacy will end up seeming like one long whine. The President’s intelligence and rhetoric demand better of himself and history.

Congress too needs to stop its continuous drone, preaching end of days if one of or another of its polarizing liberal or conservative positions is not adopted. Work on the economy. Much of America has felt absolutely no recovery. Money is tight. We can worry about the big social issues at home, in our houses of worship, and in the way we engage our civic lives. Congress’ job is to figure out taxes, job creation, and the size of its own allocations - without pork - to government agencies.

The Judicial Branch is the most mysterious and most unjust branch. Its officers are beyond the law, but they make law just the same. The Supreme Court has become politicized and oddly idiosyncratic. State Courts are run on cronyism. Just look at the recent appointment of New Jersey’s Chief Justice Stuart Rabner by Governor Christie. It was a widely reported partisan Republican-Democratic deal made by an embattled Governor. That’s not what the Founding Fathers had in mind.

It's our responsibility as citizens to lobby for this change. It's our role to press the public institutions that the Constitution enabled to do their job. Our civic organizations need to be less partisan and more concerned with basic just, good government. The Great Center needs to make a comeback. Reason is lacking in our political life, and the global scene, so reminiscent of the volatility of the Sixties, needs just that classical political virtue of thoughtful, centered civic engagement to sustain a clear path towards the good life during shaky times.

Jewish tradition states the world is being judged right now at this New Year. However presumptuous the claim, it's not a bad thing to have oversight. In a world gone mad, a re-energization of centered reason that offers accountability to a sense that there just might be a Higher Power wondering what exactly is going on down here, is a useful exercise in moving forward during unsure times. If we are serious about the American future and resolve to take action, the Jewish New Year can change our world.