

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"May it be Your will, HaShem our G-d and G-d of our fathers, that we be to the head and not to the tail."

On Rosh HaShanah evening, it is customary to eat several symbolic foods and say short requests with each. The one most people are familiar with is an apple dipped in honey, accompanied by "May it be Your will... that you begin for us a good and sweet year." Rabbi Yehudah Prero has written an [explanation](#) of this custom, as well as a list of many common examples.

One of these is said when eating the head of a fish or sheep (although some find the head of a candy fish to be a more appetizing substitute): "May it be Your will... that we be to the head and not to the tail."

There are obvious ways to explain this, of course. But I would like to look at one less obvious explanation.

Recently, I counseled a young woman who was contemplating a particular course of action. We agreed that what she was about to do would make her happier -- in the short term -- than the alternative. But when discussing where she wanted to be five years from now, she gave an answer which, if not entirely contradictory, was certainly less likely to happen if she proceeded. All of a sudden, that choice was far less appealing.

It is very easy to "live for today," and not worry about tomorrow. But if we think about where we would like to be five years from now, or 20 years from now, or how we would like to be remembered after 120 -- and, all the more so, how we would like to be viewed by G-d after 120 -- we too might choose very different courses of action. And it is those choices made for the long-term that bring us long-term happiness.

At the end of Tractate Sotah, the Mishnah describes certain things we will see during the time period called the "Birthpangs of the Messiah," the time before the Messiah arrives. "There will be an overabundance of Chutzpah," it says. "The young will embarrass their elders." And, it says, "the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog."

What does this mean, "the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog?" Again there are several obvious options (Rabbi Ezriel Tauber of Monsey has some photos from a "pet look-alike contest" that boggle the mind), but I heard a truly beautiful explanation that carries a loud ring of truth.

If you watch a man out walking his dog, you might end up thinking that the dog is leading the way. The dog is out in front, pulling the leash, and the man is following behind. But what happens when they reach a corner, and the man wants to turn right? The dog may continue forward for a little bit, until he realizes that the man has turned. A moment later, the dog is leading the man again, pulling on the leash -- but headed in an entirely new direction. The dog only appears to be leading, but is in reality subject to the whims of the master.

This is "the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog." The generation appoints "leaders" who are merely following the whims of the public, rather than telling them where they ought to go. This is not only true of political leaders; it applies as well to those spiritual leaders to whom the public looks for moral guidance. The news is filled with stories of ecclesiastical groups changing the tenets of their religion to meet the wishes of their modern-day laity. What sort of religious leadership is that? They, too, are thinking about keeping their leadership in the present, rather than laying out the course that people should follow -- whether or not it is popular.

Of course, as soon as the public recognizes that the leaders are actually followers, all religious authority is vacated -- leaving a spiritual void. Doing and saying what is right may be upsetting to many people in the short term, but it is the path to happiness down the road.

Let us be like the head, and not like the tail. Let us look for leaders who provide good guidance, whether or not what they say is what we want to hear. And let us, ourselves, not follow like tails, being pulled along by events, but let us be at the head, looking to the future, asking ourselves where we want our future to be and moving in that direction.

If we truly do this, then that alone will be a great blessing for the new year!

May everyone be inscribed for a good, blessed New Year,

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