

PURIM 2002

"We're gonna party like it's 1999!" So sang the Artist Formerly Known as Prince during the decade that best symbolizes the ethos of the 20th century, or at least its latter half. This was the Greed is Good decade. The decade where capitalism won the Cold War. Indeed, during the Big 80s, it was truly Morning in America, and throughout the developed world. The term millionaire became antiquated. "Multi-millionaire" became the new term for wealthy. And "billionaire" became the new term for role model.

Oh, those artists. They're passionate people. So expressive of the heart, and the loins. But alas, they're so commonly void of mathematical rigor. And none worse in that department than Prince. For he was trying to say that the turn of the millennium would occur immediately after 1999. In fact, however, as any junior high math student could tell you, the new millennium wouldn't appear until 2001. And so now, for the first Purim ever, we are able to reflect on what it's like to have lived for at least a year in this new millennium.

You don't have to be a math student to realize that this past year was the dawn of an era, not just a millennium. The newspaper headlines could tell you that much has changed. Great buildings have been leveled and thousands have died. But most importantly, our consciousness tells us that we live in a new world.

I want to talk tonight about the world we're entering. But first, let's take a look at the one we depart. That bygone era is best symbolized by something you can't even see: an invisible hand.

This is a concept that is primarily known for its application to microeconomics -- the notion that the hand of providence, an invisible hand, takes care of us better when we as economic producers serve our own private interests, than when we try to help others. People trying to make as much money as possible for their own profit end up producing more, better, and cheaper goods and services, and this ultimately benefits everyone ... almost magically. This magical hand of providence takes care that whatever we as consumers want is made by money-thirsty producers, and because these thirsty producers need workers and are willing to pay for their services, we'll all earn the money that we need to buy the goodies we want.

That's the notion that's commonly associated with the invisible hand. But really, it has served us subconsciously in other areas. Political economists can tell you that it also works more macroscopically. I'm referring to the idea that the doomsday theorists, people like Malthus, Ricardo or Marx, were all wet. These nattering nabobs predicted such scenarios as inevitable mass starvation when population growth outstrips our available food supply, or massive poverty when the ultra-rich are able to horde nearly all of our resources and refuse to share the wealth with the great unwashed. Here in the land of affluence, we came to believe that the invisible hand simply wouldn't permit these predictions to come true. For this hand of providence has

ensured that the rich never hoarded all the money or the power. They realized that such selfishness would spur a revolution, and this was hardly in their own private interests. Instead, they wisely permitted some amount of welfare capitalism, and fostered the conditions that support an ever-rising middle class. As for the Jeremiads about starvation, the invisible hand has ensured that money-thirsty farming pioneers invented new approaches to agriculture such that the supply of food has increased more rapidly than our population. And even population growth has been limited through government policies and greater education -- otherwise known as planned parenthood. Once again, a little human ingenuity mixed with some hard work were all that the invisible hand needed to defeat the theories of the whiners. Economically, we will always be secure, or so goes conventional wisdom.

What, you might ask, about military and foreign policy matters? No worries, mate. The invisible hand will ensure security there as well. At least that's what we came to believe, though for a while it didn't look that way. The same technology that produced better mouse traps and better agricultural devices also produced more devastating weapons. The same attitudes that allowed these mousetraps and agricultural devices to proliferate throughout the world also allowed the weapons to do the same. And way back in the 50s and 60s, people started questioning whether weapons of mass destruction would actually be used to destroy the world. The Doomsday Weapon wasn't only a figment of Stanley Kubrick's imagination; it was a real fear of just about every thinking person. Just like a Marxist revolution was once feared.

I guess people in the 50s and 60s had forgotten the invisible hand. They of little faith. They forgot the importance of providence -- perhaps divine providence, perhaps just the luck that is born from our inherent common sense and survival instincts. But whatever you call this invisible hand or this providence, it made sure that the weapons of mass destruction were never used. That the 50s came and went, and the 60s, and the 70s, and the 80s, and ... you get the picture. We were still alive. All was safe.

As the millennium came to a close, the invisible hand had brought us into a new age. No longer the stone age, the iron age, or the bronze age. No longer the industrial age that produced doomsday scenarios and calls for revolution. We were now entering the information age. Somehow, invisibly, information came across our computer screen about virtually any topic imaginable. We were all linked together. All of us peaceful, thoughtful, lovers of knowledge. We kept the faith. Those who wrote books entitled "The End of History" boasted about our way of government, of economics. They were the chroniclers of the faith. And the invisible hand reigned supreme as the symbol of the inevitability of progress. Our glorious triumph over the fears of the naysayers was complete and permanent. Our greatness as a species would only get greater.

At the dawn of the new millennium, we arose like Snow White and the Prince -- believing ourselves capable of living happily ever after. Then something happened. Was it the planes? Nah. It was just reality settling in. Or should I say, it was just another fragment of reality, the one that we tuned out when we focused instead on other mellifluous sounds. Sounds like ka ching, ka ching. Sounds like the powerful engine of a gas guzzling luxury car. Sounds like the voices of professors who toasted the invisible hand and the supremacy of the capitalist

system, and who mocked the failures of the planned economies. Now don't get me wrong. I appreciate as much as anyone else the virtues of competitive markets and the shortcomings of Marxist economics. But the sounds of capitalism raise many legitimate concerns. Concerns that have been drowned out in the western world.

At least until now. Finally, the new millennium has dawned. And a different kind of sun is rising to its zenith. More and more, people will recognize the need for another symbol. The invisible hand will no longer suffice.

So I give you a new symbol: the *watchful eye*. In conceiving of it, I don't see the wild eye of a horror show villain. Rather, I see the eye of a parent, watching intensely over his or her child. Gazing with love, but also with total focus. Staring, with the knowledge that if the eye should go to sleep temporarily, the child could go to sleep permanently.

The differences between these symbols are profound. The invisible hand is a symbol of magic, of the supernatural. Somehow, some way, a beneficent hand of fate could be counted upon to guide us. This was not the hand of our leaders. Really, it wasn't the hand of any human being in the real world. It was the Platonic Form of the hand — not merely beneficent, this helping hand was mighty, transcendent, and otherworldly.

The watchful eye is anything but magical. And far from supernatural or otherworldly. For the possessor of the watchful eye isn't some mysterious, non-human force. The possessor of the watchful eye is you. You and I. And all human beings who hope to assume responsibility for observing their planet. Reflecting upon it. And, finally, nurturing the planet to health. Now, tomorrow, and forever.

Yes, these symbols are different. The former suggests effortlessness, inevitability of progress, perhaps even divine intervention. Or at least phenomenal luck. But not the new symbol. The watchful eye suggests total focus, total effort. And because human effort is associated with pain and struggle, it is altogether plausible that this eye will begin to wander. That will not auger well for our future. For this ever-shrinking planet will survive only to the extent we continue vigilantly to care for it. If we succeed, we will be able to praise not only our talents but our values. If we fail, we will know that we were given the opportunity to succeed, but hadn't the patience to do so. Nor the wisdom.

The symbols also suggest human beings in very different roles. The invisible hand suggests the human being as inventor, as entrepreneur. Perhaps even as explorer. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." "To the victor goes the spoils and the devil take the hindmost." These might be the mottos of the person guided by the invisible hand of providence. But the watchful eye suggests the human being as parent. As therapist. As environmentalist. Perhaps even as fire fighter. "Our planet is a precious gift that must not be spoiled." "A parent must be forever alert, forever on guard." These are mottos of tomorrow.

To some, this change of symbols might be viewed as doomsaying. Instead of seeing

ourselves as go-getters, we're now seeing ourselves as restrainers. "We're now characterized best by fear, rather than hope," they might say. But that's far from the truth. Consider, for example, our role as parent. That is a fulfilling role that consists of much more than keeping our children out of harm's way. We educate them. Relax with them. Have fun with them. We grow through them, as much as they through us.

Besides, doomsayers are purveyors of ill tidings. Bloody revolutions. Massive destruction of life and property. The new symbol, on the other hand, suggests merely that the *inevitability* of progress is mistaken, not that the opposite is any more true. The fact is that our planet's health can move in either direction depending upon what we do. History has not ended. It is, in fact, entering a new phase that is extremely difficult to predict. This is because our planet needs to be studied and nurtured in numerous areas, and any number of possible consequences are in play, depending upon whether we succeed or fail in fulfilling our responsibilities.

The great philosopher John Madden once said that there are three kinds of people in the world -- those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who don't know what the hell is happening. He made the point to champion the first group. For during the era of the invisible hand, if somebody made something big happen, anything big, the invisible hand would ensure that it enured to society's benefit. Consider factory owners who polluted the air, builders of bombs that were sold all over the world, or writers of violent action films. The nattering nabobs could kvetch about these people to their hearts' content. But no nabob could change the simple fact that these folks were all among our society's movers and shakers. They fueled the global economy. They were among our so-called success stories.

I am here today to champion an altogether different group. Those who step back and watch. Those who hesitate to move and shake without first satisfying themselves that they do so sensibly, in a way that nurtures, and consistently with the Hippocratic Oath. Oh these people act, I assure you. But when they act, they do so lovingly and dutifully.

We who believe in the new symbol must have a new faith. Not in the power of a magical providence. But in the power of our own ability, working together, to save this world. Perhaps that is the essence of the creed known as humanism -- whether atheistic or theistic, all forms of humanism have that creed in common. If we watch out for one another, if we attempt to understand our planet and the manner in which it and all living forms came into being, if we truly treat our planet as we would our own children, then we shall indeed watch life on Earth continue to evolve. Yet if our eyes wander, and our minds sleep, we shall watch the awesome power of human destruction. If animals could talk they'd tell you the truth -- no species has the power to destroy like the human being.

Today, we are beginning to recognize the need for a watchful eye. Unfortunately, we recognize it almost entirely through a single, albeit widening lens. The lens of terrorism.

Obviously, terrorism must be fought. But to do so wisely, it must first be understood.

Instead of reacting to it in a panic, we must observe it closely so as to figure out how to rip it apart at its roots.

Terrorism has two handmaidens. One's name is demonization. The terrorist network swells by demonizing a nation or a government that is presently in power. And the reaction, by the victims of the attacks, is to demonize the terrorists and, often, their countrymen. It is simple to demonize. And nearly as simple to arm oneself and destroy the demons you create. What isn't simple is to civilize. To empower your enemies -- not with rage, but with the fruits of civilization. The other handmaiden's name is hopelessness. When people lose hope that they or their cause will be treated justly absent extralegal measures, that's when they resort to terrorism. So somehow, we must foster conditions that deter the prospects of demonization and ensure that people retain hope that, with patience, they will achieve justice through non-violent means.

Really, we have little choice in this area. Weapons continue to proliferate, and technologies continue to advance. If groups of people remain hopeless, and continue to demonize a particular enemy as being responsible for their abject state, they will eventually take up arms. And they ultimately will kill millions, not thousands.

So what to do? Perhaps we need to start with our self-concept. We Jews know the importance of a self-concept. We call ourselves a "People of Priests," or a "People of Scholars." And we say it enough that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. Perhaps that is why, only decades after our ancestors came to this country in droves, even though most of them remained poor or lower-middle class, the Ivy League was enforcing quotas not to ensure that we got *in* to their schools, but to keep us *out*. On scholarly measures alone, we would have been admitted in disproportionately high numbers.

Here in America, we too have a self-concept. To be Americans means to be the fortunate ones. The beneficiaries of Manifest Destiny. The good lord has given us a land rich in resources across the sea from civilization as we *knew* it. And we've made the most of this chance, because we're not only lucky, we're also industrious, courageous, and freedom loving. That's our self concept. The result, we say, has been centuries of peace and prosperity. "Over there," across the sea, they have international strife, constant wars, constant upheavals. But we avoid all entangling alliances. And that is how we've come to be the most powerful, wealthy and free nation in the world.

It sounded good. But the gig might be up. Technology has made the barrier of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans not nearly so formidable. The information age and transportation improvements have made this one world. And 21st century weapons will make us all vulnerable to each other's rage. Before, foreigners left us pretty much alone. Today, we are the greatest symbol of the status quo in geopolitics; so wherever you are, if you're dissatisfied with the status quo, the United States has become one of your favorite objects of hatred.

We need a new self concept. Instead of being a people enamored with the good fortune of being isolated, we need to see ourselves as citizens of the world. Instead of being a nation of

Marlboro Men, we need to become observers of the human condition. A nation of international scholars. But it is not enough just to be scholars. We must become ambassadors.

This will not be easy. Americans have traditionally cared little about the world outside our shores, except perhaps during those isolated situations where a country is at war with us. Then we care, but only until the war is over. We are one of the most mono-lingual people on earth. We expect others to learn our language, but have no interest in learning theirs. That's one of the reasons why military intelligence is considered an oxymoron in this country -- we don't speak anybody else's language, so how are we supposed to spy on their activities? Clearly, our love for foreign languages must be nurtured, not only for military reasons but also because we can't otherwise become a people of ambassadors. And that is what we must do: as tourists, visiting professors or students, businesspeople, politicians, whatever. When we go abroad, we must not only speak respectfully and, if possible, in the language of those we approach, but also sell a message to the world, one that will nip terrorism and violence in the bud.

What is that message? Christianity? Democracy? Rock n' roll and Hollywood? Don't make me laugh. They might form the bedrock of our culture. But we can hardly say that all other civilized people must affirm them as well. A huge component of our message must be one of tolerance for other religions and cultures. We must, for example, model tolerance even for those value systems that refuse to tolerate our own system of values, such as those cultures that disdain public expressions of the id, that trademark of the American entertainment industry.

Beyond the issue of tolerance, we much demonstrate an interest in foreign affairs. And model concern for others throughout the world -- in particular, concern that respect be paid to the sanctity of their lives and their liberty. But there exists a third component to the holy triumverate of every conservative American -- there's life, liberty, and property. We cannot talk about respect for the first two, unless we show respect for the right of all people to share in the bounty that this planet has to offer. And if we don't care about facilitating the opportunity for others to enjoy property of their own, they can't be expected to respect the property we have acquired, especially if our wealth well exceeds our needs, and their property is but a fraction of what they reasonably need for adequate nutrition, health care and shelter, let alone a modicum of luxuries. Remember your Hebrew: the word for charity, tzedukah, means justice.

People from other cultures that are rife with poverty will never trust any affluent nation until they see it as committed to alleviating poverty world wide. That's practically a given. And when our cultural ambassadors consider going abroad to tackle the roots of terrorism, they best take note of that principle. Otherwise they will be seen as hypocrites, and prime candidates for more demonization.

In short, for us to become a people of ambassadors, Americans will have to bite the bullet and declare war on world poverty with the same passion that we're now willing to wage war on Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Fortunately, we and our so-called allies have the money successfully to wage a war on poverty. And the more we spend that money, the less we'll have to spend on that other war.

All that having been said, no watchful eye could responsibly permit us to wage war on poverty alone. Even a one-eyed witness whose good eye is half asleep would have to conclude that we must deal with terrorism not just as a long term project, but as a short term cancer. For today and tomorrow, no imaginable redistribution of wealth can destroy this cancer altogether. Let's face it. Some jobs are beyond diplomacy and the skills of ambassadors. What we need are oncologists. And in this case, the oncologists don't come from Johns Hopkins, but rather from places like Paris Island and the Pentagon. Their methods, and I'm talking about the methods of military intelligence as much as the sheer blasting of weapons, are the only ways to deal with certain fanatical groups. If you don't believe me, ask those dovish Israelis who for decades have suggested making concessions in return for peace. Every time they've tried, that boulder just keeps rolling back down the hill. And more and more often, they've found that the boulder rolls down on top of one of their family members or friends.

It's a race, really. Can our soldiers and spies keep the cancer from spreading, and zap it down to a minimal size? And while that's happening, can we inexorably and rapidly move towards eliminating the world's huge pockets of poverty, its huge pockets of hopelessness and demonization? Can we send our cultural ambassadors to these places and show them that we are their partners and not some colonial power? Can we accomplish all this *before* technological advances reach the point where those who have lost hope can blow us up? Right now, I haven't the foggiest idea how that race will go. You see, in this millennium, progress is no longer inevitable.

What is inevitable is that the stakes will get higher and higher. Technology will continue to improve. World population will continue to increase. The risks of genocide and ecological destruction will rise as well. But with our new paradigm, we can handle those risks. If all who love peace will agree to watch over this fragile planet as closely as a parent watches over a child, we'll be fine.

Before I conclude, and in the spirit of ushering in an era befitting our new symbol, I want to suggest my own ideas of the demons that must be exorcized. Three to be exact. First, we must stop having such tolerance for killing. That sends a message that life isn't sacred to us, and can be taken even when not necessary for self defense or defense of others. So, for example, even though we see no indication that the death penalty deters crime, we kill hundreds of criminals who could easily be put in jail and harm nobody. Similarly, we routinely kill animals, or encourage others to kill them for us. We slaughter them for sport or for dietary consumption, even though we now know that we can live healthier lives and better conserve our environment without taking animal life. We also kill human fetuses in large numbers. And we call this a right -- a right to reproductive freedom. Agreed. That is a right. But it has little to do with the right to have unprotected, premarital sex, which isn't a right but a reflection of our tolerance for killing. Finally, we celebrate that tolerance in our movies, which glorify vigilantes and the weapons they use. We can't lovingly keep a watchful eye over this planet as long as we think killing when unnecessary is not merely acceptable, but cool.

The second and third demons are closely related to each other. One is greedy materialism. To some, it is reflected by the need to show off. To consume conspicuously. This is the perverted form of the watchful eye -- we watch over others so we'll know how to compete with them. To others, the more refined, it is manifested through a life characterized by the pursuit of total comfort, convenience, the ability to enjoy merchandise and art of the highest quality, the privilege of living or traveling in places surrounded by the greatest physical beauty. How mouth watering. But at what price? Greedy materialism was once the publicly proclaimed hero of the 1980s. Now, we're not so crass. We euphemistically talk more quietly about our desire for "financial security." But we really mean our desire to live forever in what most people throughout the world would call the lap of luxury. Soon, I fear, we will learn that this obsession is what prevents individuals and societies from sharing more than token amounts, or guilt offerings. And when the rich won't share, the poor will lose hope and take matters into their own hands. Increasingly, they'll have the technology to do that.

The third and final demon could be called the perceived asininity of altruism. By altruism, I don't mean the saintly quality of an extreme empathy for those in need. That quality is never common enough to be on anybody's radar screen, let alone their hit list. Rather, I'm referring to an attitude that one's own happiness requires devoting oneself largely, if not primarily, to the service of the public good. To the old Adam Smithian mentality, that kind of altruism was considered quaint and quirky. Heck, it was deemed counter-productive. Better for us all to look out for number one, and things will magically work out. Unfortunately, that attitude is still entrenched in our culture. People who are talented are still encouraged to avoid the public sector, to avoid jobs like school teaching and nursing, to choose instead jobs in the business world. Those who could find higher paying occupations and don't seek them are deemed silly. And perhaps they are silly. But under the new paradigm, we'll have to figure out a way to shuttle our finest minds into jobs where the stock in trade is keeping a watchful eye. We'll need our school teachers to be inspiring. We'll need our social workers to be miracle workers. We'll need our FBI agents to be brilliant. We'll need our bureaucrats to be courageous. And we'll need as many as possible of our most talented college graduates to be altruists. At least to a degree.

As I put a lid on my introduction of a new era, and a new symbol, I want to stop talking about demons, and start talking about unifying themes. One in particular. The theme of freedom was a great one. And we shouldn't give it up just because the millennium has changed. We still must have our freedom. Only it is no longer enough. For freedom, uncontrolled, will ruin the ward that is in our collective care. Ask any overly permissive parent.

The new watchword must be unity. We must come to recognize that we share a common goal -- nurturing the planet. Not just our families, or our nations, but our planet. Mother Earth must no longer be viewed only as a mother, but also as a child. We must watch out for it together with a gimlet eye, and come to recognize that both we and this child share a common fate. Are we all fundamentally partners or competitors? People whose job it is to establish the rules of the game, and then bust our asses to win it? Or people whose job it is to ensure that games represent a small fragment of life, and that the remainder goes toward cultivating common

interests?

Up until now, we've decided that the competition mode should dominate. The risks seemed worth taking. Perhaps we need to see some more people die before we change our minds. But until that happens, we individuals who believe in the new paradigm can change our lives to reflect our beliefs. Learn a foreign tongue. Use a condom. Find some nice spices and cook that tofu. And instead of whining during tax season, just be thankful that you and your fellow Americans are being forced to donate some of your cherished excess capital to those who need it more. If we hope to be able to whine about taxes in the next millennium, we had better pay those taxes and charity dollars now -- not only to the U.S. Government, but to those who are in a position to crush hopelessness throughout the world.