

HOPE - KOL NIDREI D'VAR TORAH - 5780

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קִּיּוּם אֶל-יְהוָה מִזֶּקֶן וְיִאֲמָץ לְבָבְךָ קִיּוּם אֶל-יְהוָה

When you think of Yom Kippur, you probably think about fasting, long hours in synagogue and pounding your chest with your fist as you recite long lists of your sins. What you may not realize is that our tradition considers Yom Kippur to be the happiest day of the year. Why? Because it is all about our ability to change, to repair mistakes, to start over, and to create the lives we really want. And what could be more joyful than that! At its essence, Yom Kippur is about hope.

Hope. And what does it really mean? We use it a lot in our daily conversation. I hope the weather is nice tomorrow, I hope you feel better soon, I hope things get better. But this is a misuse of the concept of hope. Hope is not wishful thinking. Wishing is passive. Hope is active. Hope is believing that change is possible and having the will to actually work to support change. Hope is seeing the challenges in front of you with clarity and choosing to act.

The difference between wishful thinking and hope reminds me of a story. There once was a very religious man who was caught in rising floodwaters. He climbed onto the roof of his house and waited for God to rescue him. A neighbor came by in a rowboat and said, "The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we'll paddle to safety."

"No thanks" replied the religious man. "I've prayed to God and I have hope that God will save me."

A short time later the police came by in a speedboat. "The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we'll take you to safety."

"No thanks" replied the religious man. "I've prayed and I have trust that God will save me."

A little time later a rescue services helicopter hovered overhead, let down a rope ladder and said. "The waters will soon be above your house. Climb the ladder and we'll fly you to safety."

"No thanks" replied the religious man. "I've prayed to God and am sure that God will save me."

All this time the floodwaters continued to rise until soon they reached above the roof and the religious man drowned. When he arrived at heaven he angrily demanded an audience with God: “Lord, why am I here in heaven? I prayed for you to save me, I trusted you to save me from that flood.”

God replied: “I tried to save you, I really tried. I sent you a rowboat, a speedboat, and a helicopter. But you never got in.”

Wishful thinking is standing on a rooftop, praying to be rescued. Hope is getting in the boat.

Of course, hope requires us to be flexible. If our first plan ends, we should look for the next plan. If the boat doesn’t work out, get in the helicopter! Or better yet, drive yourself to higher ground when an emergency is first declared. Hope is realistically assessing the situation, having a goal, making a plan and trusting in our ability to make it happen.

Researchers in the social sciences have been looking at the nature and role of hope in human development. According to Dr. Charles R. Snyder, a psychologist and lead researcher in this field, hope is not a feeling: it is a way of thinking that has three important components: goals, pathways, and agency.

Let’s use our man in the flood to explore these three core components of hope. He had a goal - don’t drown. He had a pathway - get to higher ground. But he missed the third step, agency. The belief that he had what he needed to reach his goals.

Hope is a realistic goal, a flexible plan, and most importantly we have agency -- meaning accepting and believing that we have power and then actually using that power to act on our own behalf.

Judaism gives and teaches us a powerful form of hope. One of the most well-known quotes from the Torah: “Behold, I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your children may live.”¹

“Choose life” is the Jewish motto. Each time we raise our glass to toast, a Simcha, a happy event, and say: “L’chayim,” “to life,” we affirm the decision to choose life, to hope in the future.

When I think of hope, I often think of the poem by Emily Dickinson: “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul.” But in truth hope is much more solid than that.

¹ Deuteronomy 30:19

Brene Brown, a well-known author, suggests that hope isn't fuzzy thinking, but in fact is a very practical strategy. In her research on the qualities of high achieving individuals she found that the qualities they had in common - grit, perseverance, ability to withstand failure - all amounted to what are actually active manifestations of hope. As she wrote: "Hope is a function of struggle."

Judaism recognizes that hope often begins in the midst of darkness. In the story of creation that begins the Torah, we read that when God began to create heaven and earth, at first there was only darkness over everything, until God created light. As it says: "God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day." In Judaism, time unfolds from darkness to light. For those of you who have ever been confused about why the holidays always start in the evening, it is because God creates first night and then the day. As Rabbi Yisrael Rutman writes, this is "To teach us, that there is always something good to look forward to, something to live for. No matter how bad the night, the sun always rises."

Hope is about choosing life in the face of darkness.

Last month, the NY Times ran an article about a shofar that survived Auschwitz and was on display at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in NYC. Chaskel Tydor, was a prisoner at Auschwitz. In 1945 when the camp was being dismantled and its prisoners being sent on a death march. A man he knew approached him and said: "I'm going to die on this march. If you live, take this shofar. Tell them we blew the shofar at Auschwitz."

Mr. Tydor survived the march and later that year he joined a group of former concentration camp prisoners aboard a steamship to Palestine. Only months after being liberated, he blew the shofar on Rosh Hashanah 1945 off the coast of Haifa and carried it with him for the rest of his life.

Hope is the sound of the shofar being blown in Auschwitz.
Being blown one year later off the coast of Haifa
And still being blown today by Mr. Tydor's great-grand children.

As I said earlier, Yom Kippur is at its essence about hope, about choosing life and about the belief that we can change, that Teshuvah, repentance, is possible.

There is a midrash² that teaches that before God created the world, God created teshuvah - repentance - the path to forgiveness. Take that in: before heaven and earth, before plants and animals, before humans, God created the ability to be forgiven. Why? Because God knew we would make mistakes and that there needed to be a process for repair. No one wants to make a mistake, to mess up an important task or hurt someone they love. Yet, we do. Over and over again. If mistakes are inevitable, then the ability to make amends is essential.

Hope is the belief that change is possible.

Of course, understanding mistakes as a natural, even necessary part of life, doesn't mean we can avoid the messes we've made. In fact, that's where the learning actually comes in. And that's what today is all about: cleaning up our messes, with ourselves, with others and with God. It's not easy to bear witness to where we've failed, especially when it comes to those we love. But it is necessary if we want to build better relationships, if we want to grow as a person.

Hope asks us to be willing to admit our mistakes.

Judaism at its essence is a hopeful religion. Some days, it doesn't feel that way. We read about the rise in anti-Semitism or look to Jewish history and it seems like a long series of suffering and oppression. But that is only what has happened to us. What is truly amazing is what we've done with those experiences. The great miracle of Jewish history is not just that we survived, but that we thrived. Not as an embittered, isolated tribe, but as a community with a passion for creating a better world for all. That despite all the pain and loss our people have endured, we never gave up hope in a better future. And we never stopped reaching, working and striving toward that better future. Hope is thriving in the face of suffering.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, so eloquently wrote: "To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Every ritual, every mitzvah, every syllable of the Jewish story, every element of Jewish law, is a protest against escapism, resignation or the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism is a sustained struggle... against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet... Judaism is the religion of hope."

Hope is a belief in a better future.

² Pesachim 54a - Wasn't it taught in a baraita: Seven phenomena were created before the world was created, and they are: Torah, and repentance, and the Garden of Eden, and Gehenna, and the Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of Messiah... Repentance was created before the world was created, as it is written: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God," and it is written immediately afterward: "You return man to contrition; and You say: Repent, children of man" (Psalms 90:2-3).

I would even go so far as to say that Jews are hardwired for hope. Maybe you're thinking humor and sarcasm I can see, maybe success, but hope...

In Judaism, we believe that the golden age is in the future, the age of peace is still on the horizon. Perhaps you've noticed that when we read the Torah every year, we never get to the Promised land. We get to the moment when the Israelites are about to enter and then we begin again. And while this may seem like an oversight or a problem, I believe it is intentional. The Jewish narrative has a beginning without end in order to teach us that we are responsible for creating the future we want to live in.

As Jews, we know deep down that the work of building a better world is ours, we're not waiting for someone else to provide it for us. The work is within us, not beyond us. As it says in the midrash: "Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai taught: If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone should say to you that the Messiah has come, stay and complete the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah."³

Hope is a belief in our ability to create the world we want to live in.

Rebecca Solnit, an activist and author of the book, *Hope in the Dark*, builds upon the idea that hope requires us to claim our power: "Your opponents would love you to believe that it's hopeless, that you have no power, that there's no reason to act, that you can't win... Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal... To hope is to give yourself to the future."

Hope is a call to action.

Sometimes we are given more than we can handle. The pain or suffering is too much. Unfortunately, we don't always get to choose what happens in our life. All we get to do is choose how we respond, how we cope with the challenges life throws at us and who we become as we respond to the adversity.

Hope is a choice. Sometimes, hope is the only choice.

Psalm 27 which we read during the High Holidays ends with the words:

קִיּוּם אֱלֹהֵי הַיְהוָה נִצְחָה וְיִאֱמָר לְבָרַךְ אֱלֹהֵי הַיְהוָה:

"Hope in God, be strong and have courage, Hope in God."

³ (Avot de Rabbi Nathan, 31b)

The Hebrew is in the command form. It isn't passive or descriptive, it is instructive. It asks us to be active, it says: Make yourself hopeful, look in your heart and find the internal strength and courage to choose life.

Hope isn't something we can receive from God. It's something we create in order to make a bridge to God.

There is an interesting play on words that I'd like to share with you. In Hebrew the word for hope is Tikvah and it has the same root (תקוה) as Mikveh, a ritual bath. Tikvah and Mikvah. The ancient rabbis loved a good word-play and created a midrash that says, on Yom Kippur God is like our Mikvah, we immerse ourselves in God and come out with Tikveh, hope, for a new year.

This isn't such a bad idea. We need to hear the stories of what is working, what gives us hope. We need to immerse ourselves in the mikveh of tikveh, in the healing waters of hopeful stories. This year, I asked several members of our community to share what gives them hope. We heard from Susan Pollara and Josh Lichtenstein on Rosh Hashanah and tonight from Sam Daley-Harris. Tomorrow we'll hear from Irene Goldman and Thea Albin. We need each other's stories, because finding hope is not always easy.

Take a moment to think about what gives you hope. When life is hard, what gets you up in the morning? When the news gets you down, what inspires you to keep going.

As you were coming into the sanctuary tonight, you may have received a card. If not, there are more in the baskets by the doors. Before you leave, take a few moments to write down what gives you hope. It doesn't need to be elaborate or deeply philosophical (although that's good too). It can be simple. My children give me hope. The story of the Jewish people gives me hope. Acts of kindness give me hope.

After you've filled out the cards, leave them in the baskets by the door. You don't need to write your name on the cards. Tomorrow, I will read some of your responses during services.

I hope you'll take a few minutes to write down your thoughts on hope. It's not just an exercise, I truly believe that we need each other's stories to sustain us, and encourage us through the challenges we face in our own lives and in this moment in the long arc of our history. We need to help each other by teaching each other about the ways we find and create hope in the face of pain and loss. We need to learn about and use new ways

to find hope, when the old ways stop working. We need to hear each other's stories to inspire us and give us new ways to cope when we feel hopeless.

Judaism teaches us to reach for hope over and over again. It reminds us that hope is a spiritual practice, a way of being that encourages us to work for change, to join together and to lend our hands to the building of a better world.

As we do the difficult work of Teshuvah, of spiritual repair, may we remember that change is possible and that joy is the goal. May we hear the echoes of hope in our moments of failure and struggle, in the midst of the darkness and in the call to action. As we enter into this New Year, may we hear the voice of hope, like a shofar in the wilderness, calling us to create a better future.

And may the words of Psalm 27, stay close:

קוֹה אֶל-יְהוָה וְיִצְמַח לְבָבִי לְקוֹה אֶל-יְהוָה

“Have hope, be strong and find courage in your heart.”