

Hoping Against Hope

During the early years of the State of Israel, Dr. Avraham Holtz, a professor at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary, traveled to the Holy Land on sabbatical. "When he had found an apartment and moved in, he registered with the municipality to have a telephone installed. A week went by, two weeks went by, a month went by, and still no one came to install a phone. He went down to the office, and asked if they had lost his application. The bureaucrat looked up his name in the records and said: 'No, we have your name and your application right here.' Dr. Holtz said: 'In that case, when will I get a phone?' The bureaucrat looked in the records again, and said: 'There is a long waiting list ahead of you. My guess is that you may get a phone in about a year or two.' Dr. Holtz was shocked. He said: 'Do you mean to say that I can't get a phone any sooner than that? Is there no hope?' The bureaucrat closed his books and looked at him, replying: 'My dear sir. It is forbidden for a Jew to say there is no hope. 'Hope' there is; 'possibility' there isn't."¹

And yet, with each passing day, I am speaking with more and more people who are finding it difficult to maintain hope in the future. For some, the reasons for their disillusionment are personal. Careers that feel as if they have stalled and bring little personal fulfillment beyond a paycheck or those who are unable to find suitable employment at all and despair in their ability to provide for themselves and their families. Some are experiencing strains in their marriages or profound worries for their children's educational, financial, or physical wellbeing. Still others are struggling to provide appropriate care for aging or ailing parents without any light to be seen at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

And, of course, our personal woes are compounded by issues of local, national, and global unrest which further erode our collective ability to envision brighter days ahead. In recent months we have seen vile racist and anti-Semitic ideology emerge from the shadows and into the public square. We have seen an adversarial foreign power boldly and shamelessly interfere with our national elections with little evidence that we are working to avoid such intrusion in the future. We have seen North Korea – in all its wild unpredictability - emerge as a nuclear threat. We have seen hyper-partisanship in our nation reach new peaks, making compromise, consensus, and forward progress seem all the more unattainable. And, of course, the recent hurricanes were a reminder to all that rising global temperatures are bringing with them new and often devastating threats to communities at home and abroad.

So...happy new year?

In all seriousness, it is easy to see why – for many – there is a sense of despair... hopelessness in the face of what can feel like overwhelming and ceaseless life challenges. Of course, we are not the first generation to feel inundated by the ills of the world.

¹ As retold on americanrabbi.com

The ancient Greeks enshrined this experience into their mythology of how humanity first came to be. Zeus, their legend holds, created Pandora, the first human female, and gave her a gift...a beautiful box that she was instructed never to open. Like Adam and Eve, in our tradition's myth of human creation, Pandora could not resist the temptation of this forbidden fruit, and after some time she opened the box, releasing a storm of misfortunes: disease, poverty, misery, sadness, death, and all the evils of the world. Out of understandable fright, Pandora slammed the box shut once again, leaving only one remaining item inside...and that treasure was hope. Pandora released this final element of the gift, and it fluttered about touching the wounds that had been left behind by all the world's evils. To this day, when faced with overwhelming troubles and tribulations, humanity retains this most powerful and timeless of tools. It is, truly, the gift that keeps on giving.

But what is hope? It can sometimes seem ethereal, a fanciful indulgence in the face of true adversity. Rabbi Maurice Lamm, an expert on this topic in the Jewish tradition provides this definition: At its simplest, hope is "a feeling that what is wanted will happen; desire accompanied by expectation."² "Hope is a paradox. It's up in the air, yet it is ground zero. You can't go to the bank with it, but you can't leave home without it. You can't marry without it, you shouldn't go into business without it, [and] you can't start a research project without it. Unquestionably, without it there is little incentive to live at all. On the other hand, you can't base a marriage on it alone, and your business needs a whole lot more than hope...Hope reformulates itself spontaneously in response to external conditions and internal fears. It enlarges when the news is good, and diminishes after even a small blow to the ego. Its profound complexity belies its surface simplicity."³

Indeed, this is a term that we use in our speech so casually and informally that it may seem devoid of real meaning, yet it is also the one aspect of our humanity that others cannot rob from us and is our chief weapon in our battle against the onslaught of life's most disquieting travails. No wonder, then, that Judaism has enshrined hope as one of the foundational cornerstones upon which our tradition stands.

Evidence for this abounds:

- When the Pharaoh of our Exodus narrative proclaimed that all the sons born to Israelites were to be killed, it was hope that compelled Moses' parents to bear him and safeguard his life,
- And it was hope for a home all our own that moved the Israelites that Moses would grow to lead through 40 years of desert wandering.
- The prophet Jeremiah imbued our ancestors with hope when he spoke these words to them during their exile in Babylonia: "Restrain your voice from weeping, Your eyes from shedding tears; For there is a reward for your labor, You shall

² Lamm, Maurice, The Power of Hope: The One Essential of Life and Love, Rawson Associates, New York, 1995, p. 26

³ Ibid., pp. 18-19

return from the enemy's land, and there is hope for your future...Your children shall return to their country."⁴

- And those sentiments were then woven by our Sages into nearly every page of our prayerbooks, the repository where we store all of our people's hopes for our collective future, our aspirations for wisdom, healing, abundance, lasting legacy, righteousness, justice, and most of all, peace.

In fact, one need only look at the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah to see these themes come to life. Traditionally, the section of Torah read on this first day of the holiday is not the tale of the binding of Isaac, but rather that of Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, who had been borne by Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar. Out of apparent jealousy, Sarah eventually demands that Abraham cast Hagar and Ishmael out from the camp and into the wilderness. The Torah then tells us that:

"Early the next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water was gone, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance; for she thought, '[I cannot bear to] look on as the child dies.' She burst into tears. God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand.' Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up..."⁵

In so many ways were our Sages wise in selecting this story for us to reflect upon during Rosh Hashanah. It is about preserving life, and today is all about birth and renewal as we ring in the onset of a new year. This is a story about some of the most real and painful of circumstances...marital discord, relationships strained by distance – physical and emotional, the potential loss of beloved life. And, yet, at its core, these verses are also about the power of hope to preserve us through life's harshest trials for when the angel asks Hagar what troubles her, he also provides a solution to her woes... "Lift up the boy...take him by the hand...care for him, nurture him, save him, and you will save yourself in the process. Now lift up your eyes and see the possibilities that lie ahead. Fear not." As Jewish philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, would put it many centuries later, "No hope is unmingled with fear, no fear unmingled with hope."⁶ Though we may enter this new year of 5778 with deep concern and trepidation in our hearts, that means that we get to bring hope along on the journey with us as well.

For Jews throughout the centuries, hope has been, in part, about survival. How many of those souls who survived the black night of the Holocaust were able to do so subsisting only on the hope of being reunited with friends and loved ones? How many Jews sustained our traditions through the harshest of treatment during two thousand

⁴ Jeremiah 31:16-17

⁵ Genesis 21:14-20

⁶ *Ethics*, 1677

years of diaspora living inspired only by the hope that – someday – we would be able to return to our own homeland in the land of Israel? And how fitting is it that the national anthem of that modern state is entitled, “*Hatikvah*...The Hope,” a fulfillment of those dreams? And how many Jews successfully endured decades of persecution because of their faithful hope that – someday – a Messiah, or at least a Messianic age, would arrive and redeem all of humanity, ushering in a new era of wholeness and peace? Such faith is merely a form of hope...hope that one’s relationship with the Divine will be a source of strength, guidance, and revitalization in our lives. Yet, for Jews, our hope has not only been about survival through darkness. It has also been our clarion call to personal and societal transformation, beckoning us like the shofar’s blast does on this new year’s day.

Rabbi David Lipper tells this story: “One day a farmer working in his field heard a terrible crash and then a splash, followed by loud braying and the sounds of kicking. He ran across the field to find that his most precious donkey had strayed from the barn and fallen into the well. It was a very deep well, and there was no way for the farmer to lift the donkey out of it. He called to his neighbors, who tried to tie a rope around the donkey to lift him up...but in the end they failed...One farmer suggested that – [with no other solutions left] – they bury the donkey in the well. [Perhaps this would end its suffering more quickly.] The first shovelful of dirt smacked the donkey on the back...He shook the dirt off his back and continued kicking. Another shovelful of dirt fell, then another. Each time, the donkey shook the dirt off. Soon the donkey realized that he could save himself by pulling his feet up out of the water that was becoming mud, and by stepping up...Dirt continued to rain down on him, and he continued to shake off each shovelful...Step by step, the donkey climbed out of the well that had trapped him and ambled off into the field.” In reflecting on this tale, Rabbi Lipper teaches us: “A lot of our lives are spent succumbing to the weight of the earth being shoveled upon us. Shake it off!”⁷ Then, step up, and take the first necessary strides towards personal, communal, and societal growth.

Each year during these Days of Awe I visit the *mikveh* – the ritual bath – at Mayyim Hayyim in Newton. Just as Jewish women traditionally immerse to mark the passage from one monthly cycle to the next, or others to mark a major life transition like getting married or recovering from illness, I engage in this ritual at this season in order to help me to transition from one year into the next. Doing so is a prayer in and of itself, for you see, *mikveh* has the same origins in Hebrew as *tikvah*, meaning “hope.” Whether embarking upon a new year, concluding chemo treatments, beginning a new marriage or a new life as a Jew, the ritual of *mikveh* invites us to bathe ourselves in hope. For, just as these living waters contribute to our own personal transformations...our hopes do just the same, inspiring us to take the next steps towards our goals, moving us to remake our lives and our world into the sanctuaries of healing, justice, and peace for which we long.

⁷ Three Times Chai: 54 Rabbis Tell Their Favorite Stories, Becker, Laney Katz, Behrman House, Inc., Township, NJ, 2007, p. 132.

Dante imagined a sign as one entered hell, that read, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”⁸ For, indeed, hopelessness is hell. Jews hang different signs. Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, discovered one hanging above the old synagogue in Breslov, Poland that read, “Gevalt! Don’t give up!”⁹ How fitting.

For, as Rabbi Lamm reminds us, “Hope is very much a contribution of God to humanity. Religious optimism is a buoyant, irrepressible, unflagging self-confidence born of hope – an indefinable, unreasoned, logic-defying expectation of delivery from the most horrendous circumstances. If we don’t use it we are ignoring a gift that is as free as our minds and our imaginations...” It is a gift that we seek to give to our children and grandchildren only to discover that they give it back to us a thousand times over. “Hope contains spectacular power, as though it captured bits of the bursting energy of creation.”¹⁰

And so we pray on the eve of his new year:

“God, give us dreams to match our nights
And let us awake to hope and light
And to the memory of stars that will return
When it grows dark again.”¹¹

L’shanah tova u’tikvah – May it be a year filled with goodness and hope for us all.

⁸ Inferno

⁹ Lamm, p. 41

¹⁰ Lamm, p. 20

¹¹ Rabbi Albert Friedlander, as found in Day by Day, Stern, Chaim, Beacon Press, 1998, p. 71.