

Erev Rosh Hashana 5777  
 Rabbi Rachel Joseph  
 Agents of Hope

I loved being pregnant. I felt good. My blood pressure, my sugars, my heart rate, were all fabulous. At 41 weeks pregnant, my doctor wanted me to be induced and I agreed. I checked in to the hospital at 8:30pm on that Sunday evening, expecting to get my last good night's sleep as the medicine did its job and then I would finally meet my child. By 9pm I was hooked up to all the machines and monitors. Then the nurse started asking strange questions: when was the last time you felt the baby move? Do you know what the heart rate was at the your last appointment? What have you had to eat today? She then handed me a popsicle to eat in hopes of eliciting a response from the baby. By 9:30pm, the nurse was on the phone with my OB. By 9:45pm the anesthesiologist was at my bedside wondering if there was time for local anesthesia or if they would need to put me completely under. By 10:15pm, my son entered this world through an emergency c-section.

He didn't make a sound. His APGAR score, a method to quickly summarize the health of a newborn baby, was a 4 -- dangerously low -- and he was rushed off to the NICU. I was full of fear and despair. Would my son survive? Would I ever get to hold him in my arms? Would I give him a name? The fear, the terror, the hopelessness. What signs did I miss while I was pregnant? What did I do wrong? I had every reason to lose hope. But it wasn't hopeless. My son's APGAR score rose to an 8, he was breathing on his own. He was hopeful, he was a fighter. He was surrounded by nurses cheering him on; I held him in my arms and watched his little chest rise and fall. My mighty Max was here, and in the moments after his birth, without even knowing it, Max taught me a whole lot about patience, faith, and especially about hope. You see, to live with hope is a profound exercise in our humanity and specifically in our Jewishness.

On this New Year I want to speak about hope. Hope for our country, hope for our community, hope for our congregation, hope for our families, hope for ourselves.

Hope, one of the most forward-facing emotions. Hope, a word forever enshrined as the national anthem of the Jewish People, *HaTikvah*. A spiritual orientation that we are asked to summon, even when -- perhaps especially when -- things seem hopeless.

The Talmud<sup>1</sup> wonders: When we die, and are summoned to judgment, what questions will we be asked? They include: "Were you honest in business?" "Did you devote yourself to family?" "Did you set aside time for sacred study?" And one more: Tzipita lishua? Literally, "Did you anticipate redemption?" Colloquially, "Did you live with hope?"

Now I can understand why God would care if I spent time with my family or engaged in Torah study or had professional integrity. These are concrete reflections of some of Judaism's core values: family, learning, economic justice. But what is so essential about having hope in my heart? How is that a measure of my life's worth, my ticket to the World to Come?

Hope is a word we toss around often enough: "I hope I get to work on time this morning. I hope the meeting goes well. I hope I find a parking space near temple :-)" But that's not what the Talmud means when asking, "Did you live with hope in your heart?" Hope is not a wish list, hope is an encompassing orientation towards life, a kind of faith in the future. To hope is to be an

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

active participant in making something happen -- not only to wish for something but also to believe in its potential realization.

To hope is to conceive of things turning out differently from how they might, to believe in the possibility of a positive outcome, despite any or all evidence pointing to the contrary. Like religion, hope is irrational. There isn't always a scientific or historical reason to believe that tomorrow will be better than today. In fact, things sometimes do get worse before they get better. That's why having hope requires that we take the long view. We simply never know when or how it might be fulfilled.

To be clear, having hope does not mean denying our current existence but rather defying it. Sociologist Peter Berger<sup>2</sup> calls hope "a signal of transcendence," something that speaks to us from beyond where we are. Hope is future-focused, forcing us to squarely face the facts of life and then seeing something better past them. As such, hope is a uniquely human quality. Among all the species on earth, only we can think in the future tense, allowing our mind to inhabit a different reality than our body. Living with "hope in our hearts" entails a kind of dual-consciousness, where we at once dwell in the world that is and at the same time aspire to the world as it might yet be, the world as it should be. And this is the very definition of what it means to be a Jew throughout the ages.

Yet, hope is not an easy emotion to summon these days. The sheer quantity of broken bodies, broken marriages, broken careers, broken plans, broken families, broken friendships, broken prosperity is overwhelming.

We look away. We try not to dwell on it. We wake up in the morning hoping for health and love, justice and success, we build quick mental and emotional defenses against the inrush of bad news, and we try to keep our hopes up. And then something happens that puts us or someone we care about in a pile of despair.

And it is not only our personal trepidation that is palpable. It's also our national anxiety. Our broken world, broken justice system. It's a time of aggression, of weakness, of hatred. The fabric of society frayed. Democracy looks outmoded. Politicians, haunted by their incapacity, play on the fears of their populations, who are device-distracted or under device-driven stress. Dystopia is a vogue word, the opposite of the hope-driven utopia in the 20th century. The 2016 election cycle has brought to the surface such despair, rage, hopelessness.

I don't know about you, but this dystopia thing is starting to get to me. And it's not just the tragedies of today. There is also the eerie feeling that, as a nation, we have been here before. And 24 hour news shows tempt us to abandon hope every day: We hoped that things would be different. We hoped that extremism would be overcome. We hoped that our differences would bring us together and not tear us apart. We hoped that he or she was the one. We hoped that the tests would prove negative. We had hoped that ... I invite you to think about your own hopes...

In America, the notion of hope is ubiquitous. We cannot escape the tyranny of hope: Keep Hope Alive. Hope for the Best. The Audacity of Hope.

But in Judaism, the notion of hope, of *Tikvah*, is more nuanced and complex. It's time to reclaim hope, It's time to believe in its realization, It's time to create the hope-filled world as it should be.

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<sup>2</sup> Berger, Peter. *A Rumor of Angels: Modern and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. Doubleday, 1969.

Some believe that it comes from the book of Zechariah: *Shuvu l'vitzahron, asirey hatikvah* -- Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope. (Zechariah 9:12)<sup>3</sup>

But what does it mean to be a "prisoner of hope"? Zechariah was not speaking about literal prisoners. He was addressing the people of Judah after they had been released from exile in Babylon and had returned to their homeland. You would think returning from exile would mean the people were finally free but they had become prisoners in another sense. The destruction to which they had returned was overwhelming, and it required great energy just to cobble together the things needed for a subsistence-level existence.

As a result, many had become prisoners of despair. Through Zechariah, however, God called them to fresh hope based on the covenant made with them. Rather than being prisoners of despair, they now were "prisoners of hope."

That phrase is a literal translation of the Hebrew, but its meaning, as made clear by the context, is "prisoners who now have hope," like a person who is still incarcerated but who maintains hope.

For all of us in a very fraught time of our nation and world's history and for those facing a more personal despair. Whatever the challenge we face, we do have a choice. We have a choice between being a prisoner of despair or a prisoner of hope.

The prophet tells us that to be a prisoner of hope, we must withhold our self-doubt, we must not despair. In practical terms it means not giving up, despite the odds or the chorus of negativity in our ears.

A second possible etymology for Hope links *Tikvah* to the word *Kav* which means a thread or a cord.<sup>4</sup> In the Book of Joshua, a pair of Hebrew spies are assisted by a prostitute from Jericho named Rachav. The spies promise that her home will be spared when the city walls come tumbling down and the Israelite army assaults Jericho. They instruct Rachav to hang a scarlet cord from her window to identify the house. The Bible calls this red thread a *tikvah*. An umbilical cord. A scarlet lifeline of hope.

In our loneliest, most disconnected moments, we sometimes forget that there are lifelines. Who are your lifelines? Think for a moment of a time in your life when you felt hopeless. Perhaps you had hit rock bottom -- a worry so deep and inconsolable -- about a child, sibling, parent, friend, community, or nation -- that you could not see a way out. I do not know why it is so, but there are some years that take more than they give.

Maybe you've had one of those years. Whatever brought you to that place, think now about the people in your life who became your lifeline. If you are in a desperate situation right now, think about the people who could provide a lifeline, if you were to reach out. When you have a few moments to yourself, call that friend who came through. Tell your loved ones how they gave you hope when you needed it. They may already know. They may not need your gratitude. They may feel it's unnecessary. Tell them anyway. If you need a lifeline but have felt too afraid or too ashamed to call, make it your High holiday pledge to reach out.

This is what hope looks like. A crimson cord. An umbilical cord. A lifeline. A tether to the Most High. A friend, a family member, perhaps a total stranger, who came through when you felt abandoned and alone.

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<sup>3</sup> Sherman, Charles S. *The Broken and the Whole: Discovering Joy after Heartbreak*. Scribner, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Marmur, Rabbi Michael. "Lifeline to the Future." *Reform Judaism Magazine* Summer 2009  
<http://rjmag.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=1470>

A final perspective on hope, *Tikvah*, comes from the word *Mikveh*<sup>5</sup>, the ritual bath that we use for everything from making utensils kosher to immersing a convert to Judaism. The Prophet Jeremiah described God as *Mikveh Yisrael*, usually translated as, “The Hope of Israel.”<sup>6</sup>

What makes a vessel into a *mikveh*? It must connect to a source of living, flowing waters. We are building a new community *mikveh* in Portland and when it is complete, it will be a beautiful and serene space with a stunning pool in the center of the building. Opening the valve in the pool will release rainwater from a collection basin, connecting the *mikveh* to the flow of the universe. The ocean is a *mikveh*; the pool at the MJCC is not. A lifeline connects us to a single person, pulling us up out of the brink; a *mikveh* surrounds us with the caring that only a community can bring. The cruelest trick that hopelessness plays on us is to convince us of the utter loneliness of our situation. To love and to lose; to grieve; could there be more universal human experiences than these? Yet hopelessness would have us conclude: “No one could possibly understand what I’m going through.”

That feeling, the loneliness of hopelessness, can arise even with someone right by your side. But hope is more than a crimson cord keeping us from the abyss. It is a *mikveh*, a total embrace, promising: you are not alone. Immerse yourself in the living waters of this community and emerge regenerated, renewed, reborn. Search this sanctuary and know that here sit hundreds of people and more, more like you than you know. Look around this great *mikveh*, this sacred collection of humanity, this pool of hope. Even when we feel desperate and desolate, we belong to a living, thriving community, a community charged through acts of loving-kindness to bring God’s own hope to the often lonely and mystifying landscape of human existence.

This is, after all, what it means to be a hopeful Jew. We hopeful Jews are the people of the Prophet Zechariah, *Asirey Hatikvah*, we are “Prisoners of Hope.” Embracing the bonds of hope. We hopeful Jews reach for the crimson cord, the lifeline tethered to the Most High; tethered to our sacred community. We hopeful Jews never give up, we are connected to our sacred pool of hope moving us forward to the world as it should be.

Yes, there will always be those who tell us not to bother with hope. At times our voices may join that grim chorus of hopelessness. When my son was rushed off to the NICU, I was left in the operating room. No one would talk to me. No one would answer my questions. I became part of the grim chorus. But I had hope in my heart. Max had shown me that we do not need to be prisoners of despair. Who knew, at that moment five years ago, that today my Mighty Max would begin Kindergarten and true to his dramatic entry into this world, and his tenacity, he has already been to the principal’s office twice. (Don’t get me started). Max lives life to its full potential, full of hope in his heart.

We do not need to be prisoners of despair. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches, “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.”<sup>7</sup> As Shimon Peres, z”l, often said, “There are no hopeless situations, only hopeless people.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 17:13

<sup>7</sup> Sacks, Jonathan. *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism and Israel in the Twenty-First Century*. Schocken, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Statement by National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice on the Passing of President Shimon Peres. September 28, 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/28/statement-national-security-advisor-susan-e-rice-passing-president>

For hope is not passive. Hope is not standing on the sidelines. It's also not wishful thinking. Hope is the courage to work for a better world. Hope is the comprehension that there is always so much within our power. And hope is about not giving up.

Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope – cried the prophet. My prayer for all of us at this New Year is that, we too, will embrace the bonds of hope. We will look to the horizon and see the possible born from the impossible. We will look to each other for lifelines, support and strength. And together we will go out into the world, into the living waters of community, and be agents of hope, active participants in creating a better world, a world as it should be!

Keyn Yehi Ratzon, May it be God's Will!

Shana Tova!

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