

Rosh Hashana 5774
 Ani Ma'amin – I Believe
 Rabbi Rachel L. Joseph

You have to be a little bit crazy to work in Washington, DC. For most of my twenties, I worked day-in and day-out as a non-profit lobbyist fighting to uphold our Constitution and protect those who don't have a voice in our society. I sat in a hundred conference rooms, a hundred committee rooms, I set up hearings, wrote legislation and testimony. I built relationships with dozens of Members of Congress and their staff. I fought the same legislative battles every year – over and over again, with no end in sight, and while nothing got better, I believed, I truly believed, I could make a difference. Every morning, I would drop off my husband at his social service job in South East Washington, DC, and promise to protect his clients; as I sat in the Capitol that day, I would always have them in mind. I believed what I was doing mattered to real people. But this is the ultimate paradox for me: to believe I could make a difference and at the same time to be completely disillusioned. I struggled to hold both of these conflicting truths at the same time: I am a believer and, a bit more than I want to be, a skeptic.

Ani ma'amin b'emunah sh'lamah b'viyat haMashiach. (I believe with full faith in the coming of the Messiah.) I believe, I honestly believe, and have chosen to live my life believing, that redemption is possible, believing that this imperfect world can be perfected. I really believe b'viyat haMashiach, in the coming of the Messiah. Let me be clear: Not in a literal way. I don't see a person riding into Jerusalem, on a white donkey. But I embrace the larger understanding: that peace can be established through justice and righteousness, that it is possible to make things better: among races and religions, between countries, between people, between parents and children.

In my lifetime, I have actually seen things that make me hopeful. I have worked for full equality of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Community (LGBTQ). Today, we are overturning discriminatory laws in state after state and soon we will achieve the goal of marriage equality for all, including our great state of Oregon. My son is growing up in a world where it doesn't matter who you love.

In my lifetime, women were accepted as equal participants in religious life and today make up almost half of the rabbis in the Reform Movement. And in 2010, the first woman was ordained as an orthodox rabbi.

I believe redemption is possible.

Our tradition actually teaches a vision of messianic redemption...It's found in the words of the prophet Isaiah. There will be a time when the wicked will be no more and justice and righteousness will prevail. When the lion will lie down with the lamb. Isaiah describes this wonderful vision where predator and prey are at peace and our world will be one and at peace.¹

At the same time, my skeptical streak sees a world that is really messed-up with no appreciable chance, honestly, of getting much better. Last year, as a congregation, we donated over 6,000 pounds of food to Lift Urban Portland to feed those in need. Yet, it was a drop in the bucket. We are still the hungriest state in the country. As much as I believe that teshuvah, this word that we hear over and over again during these Days of Awe, a word which for me means the transformative possibility of change, is my core Jewish value, there are days when I have to

¹ Isaiah chapter 11

look myself in the mirror and ask, “how’s that working out for you, Rachel?” And some days, the answer is “not so great.”

On this Rosh Hashanah 5774, the birthday of the world and start of the New Year, when we are asked to be hopeful and believe that teshuvah, transformative change, is possible, I want to explore how I am struggling to hold both of these conflicting truths at the same time: how do I believe in tikkun olam, the possibility that this broken world can be repaired, and yet, also know that things don’t seem to be getting much better. And I want to further explore how we – you and I -- can hold this paradox together. The paradox of believing in the redemption of the world and at the same time being skeptical.

At this moment I am like Teveya the Milkman in Fidler on the Roof. Teveya argues with himself as he tries to make sense of his world: over and over again he says for all to hear, “on the one hand I believe, and on the other hand I believe, and on the other hand...No. There is no other hand.”

There’s an old Jewish joke but it’s really much more than a joke. It’s about two older men, David and Joshua, who are standing outside the synagogue before High Holiday services. They are good friends and they’re arguing. David is delivering a brilliant philosophical proof, explaining how God couldn’t possibly exist and his friend Joshua is listening and beginning to get won over to this no-God position, but then David looks at his watch and says, “Joshua, it’s ten after six! We’re going to be late for services! Come on! It’s time to pray!”

David is not convinced that God exists but that’s beside the point: he’s part of the community, he understands the importance of showing up, so he acts “k’ilu” “as if” God’s existence was true. You see, in Judaism, doubt is allowable. But action is required!

Rabbi Mark Golub says when you are given the honor of having an aliyah/blessing to the Torah, nobody stops you on the way up to make you sign a statement that you believe every word you are about to say; the truth of the moment isn’t in the literal meaning of the words of the prayer. The truth is found in our complex relationship with tradition, history, family, friends and community. I am sounding like Teveya again. Even if we have doubts, we MUST act “k’ilu” – “as if” the words make sense.

And when I act “k’ilu” as if there is an order to the world, a meaning to our existence, call it “God,” call it “holiness” then I’m rewarded with a flash of understanding about what’s important in my life.

We can apply the concept of “k’ilu” to managing our life while living in an unredeemed world. I’m not suggesting that we live our lives “playing pretend.” I’m suggesting that we try to place ourselves in a framework where we imagine, and actually commit ourselves to living -- as if -- things can be fixed even when we’re not 100% sure it’s possible. This is the polar opposite to the tee shirt message that made the rounds a number of years ago: “In three words I can sum up everything I’ve learned about life: what’s the point?” Living “k’ilu” would be “life presents extraordinary opportunities for growth and joy and transformation. That **IS** the point” So make the most of it.

When I live my life k’ilu, as if, I believe I can engage one-to-one the vast majority of the Jews in Portland meaningfully in Jewish life and learning and celebration, even if that’s really ambitious, I’m going to project the right kind of enthusiasm and belief in the importance and value of the work than if I resign myself to small aspirations and small successes. I aspire to make my thoughts messianic, as if this world can be redeemed. If we live our lives, k’ilu, as if we can make a difference, then our belief and action will overtake our skepticism.

Because to be Jewish is to believe in the possibility of an upside-down world, that there is a difference between the world as it is and the world as it should be; that the world as it is, is not a clear world; that the world is broken. “Human suffering,” teaches Rabbi Edward Feinstein, “is our experience of the brokenness of the world. Far from disengaging, the Jew is taught to embrace the world and seek to bring it back to wholeness, to oneness.”² And what that often requires is a good shaking up, a good turning upside down.

So how do we get there, from the world as it is to the world as it should be? How do we believe in the possibility? Reverend Jim Dollar, a retired pastor from Greensboro, North Carolina, recommends opening our eyes. “Nothing changes how things are like waking up to how things are. Seeing that the emperor has no clothes puts clothes on the emperor. If you want to change the world, see the world. Of course, the caveat here is that seeing the world also changes you. The transformer is transformed through the process of transformation. What? You wanted things to change without **YOU** being different?”³

Some of us may seek to open our eyes by actually seeing the homeless person we pass on the street. My father was mortified this summer when he mistook a homeless person sleeping on the sidewalk as a pile of trash bags. He now really sees the homeless and asks what can be done to help this problem. How do WE open our eyes? We should be volunteering at a soup kitchen, pursuing a more fulfilling job, celebrating Shabbat at home, making going to synagogue a regular part of our way in the world. Any one of these choices could open our eyes and start things moving in the right direction.

We may open our eyes just by turning on the news. Not only the Daily Show. Because the world as it should be doesn't have people dying because they can't access healthcare, or people sleeping on the streets because we don't have enough affordable housing and living wage jobs.

Once we open our eyes and are awakened, we have to act. After all, we're talking about the world as it should be, not the world that is most comfortable for us. Can we summon the courage to sacrifice so that others will live in dignity with adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medicine?

Sometimes our eyes get opened for us: we're rolling along and nothing in particular happens, our eyes have not been opened, but suddenly we feel like we've hit a wall. The honeymoon comes to an end. It happens in marriages; it happens in careers; it happens in retirement. This is the point of awakening. This is the moment of the world turning upside-down. And when the dizziness stops and we come to our senses we awaken to a single question staring us in the face: What can I do -- what can we do -- to make the world more like it should be?

I believe, I truly believe, that while living in an unredeemed world, changing the world starts with our own personal change of heart. In the world as it should be, the respect we reserve for doctors, judges, business executives, and clergy we also give to administrative professionals and custodians and teachers and the unemployed and disabled, because in the world as it should be, everyone's most honored title is “child of God.”

Reverend Jim Dollar again: “The Dalai Lama may not live to see the end of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, but in his approach to that situation, he has effectively and beautifully prevented the Chinese from occupying his heart. First the heart, then the world.”⁴

² <http://www.vbs.org/page.cfm?p=474>

³ <http://outlandspress.blogspot.com/2006/10/101906.html>

⁴ *ibid*

My last thought for this moment for living in an unredeemed world is what I'll call the Moses strategy or the "stop concentrating on the end goal but figure out how you can contribute to the journey." As we learn from Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Fathers, Rabbi Tarfon said: "It is not our job to complete the task but neither are we allowed to desist from the work."⁵ And what did Moses do? Moses put aside all his ego needs, all his possible arrogance of holding power. Moses exercised his humility and concentrated on getting Israel through its journey to the Promised Land, even though he was not going into the land with the people.

Moses, the greatest leader in Jewish memory is described in our tradition as *anav m'ode*, very humble, more than any other person on the face of the earth. That is the only character trait attributed to Moses in the Torah and he is the only individual in the entire Bible described as humble.

At the end of the Torah, there's no retirement party for Moses where all the leaders and heads of tribes get up and praise him and say what a phenomenal job he has done getting them out of Egypt. When we look at our text, Moses is not focusing on himself at all. Even though he has completed an extraordinary accomplishment with his life, bringing this nation into being, he is not waiting for anyone to get up and thank or praise him.

Moses' example is inspiring as we negotiate living and working in an unredeemed world. When you are engaged in important work, nothing is quite as distracting as worrying about yourself and distressing over if you are getting enough credit and thanks and praise for what you are doing.

To me, it seems that Moses was so committed to the work: contributing to the liberation of the Jewish people, getting us out of Egypt, physically and spiritually, that he chose not to be diverted by issues of his personal *kavod*, personal honor.

Humility involves a balancing act in between selflessness and selfishness, figuring out just how much space to take up in the room, in a conversation and in a relationship. In the words of one of my teachers, "being humble does not mean being a nobody; it just means being **no more** of a somebody than you ought to be."

In the midrash, rabbinical stories, our sages describe exactly what Moses did in the weeks before he died. The story says that this great leader basically chose to become a servant to Joshua, cleaning his room, laying out his clothes in the morning.⁶ Moses wanted to make sure that the people saw the extraordinary regard that he had for Joshua, for the next generation of leadership, so the transition would go smoothly. Maybe he was thinking strategically more about the future of his people than he was thinking about himself.

A mentor taught me: you can get an awful lot done in your life if you don't care who gets the credit. If we do that right, it can free us from a lot of the petty hurts and distractions that can make people become disillusioned and rarely add to the quality of our lives and the health of our psyches. We act humbly when we listen to others to affect change in the world.

Adopting "the Moses strategy" means not allowing ourselves to get diverted: There is just too much work to do. There are people who are hungry and thirsty.

There are family and friends we love who need our support. And ultimately, no praise from other people is as satisfying as knowing internally that we have done something meaningful with our time and energy.

⁵ Pirke Avot 2:21

⁶ Legends of the Jews, *Moses and Joshua*, pg. 101

The truth is that we live in an unredeemed world and we are frustrated. As Rabbi Tarfon said: “the day is short and the task is long.”⁷ We are believers and we are skeptics – all at the same time. When we are feeling daunted, we must choose to live “*k’ilu*” as if we can have an impact, as if we believe we can create change, even when we have doubts or we are tired or the day feels really long. And we must open our eyes and our hearts to the world as it is and build the world as it should be. We must figure out when certain accomplishments and changes are good enough and we can live knowing that our efforts have moved the ball down the field, even if we are not the one to score the touchdown. It is ultimately more satisfying to be committed to the important task at hand than to worry about how much we should be thanked or praised for our work. There is beauty in the journey and it feels good to focus outside our selves and do the work. Occasionally, it even feels great.

Ani ma’amin, I believe, I honestly believe, that redemption is possible, that this imperfect world can be perfected; that peace can be established through justice and righteousness, that it is possible to make things better. That if we act humbly, open our hearts, live as if we can have an impact, we will affect change in the world. Yes, I am a little bit crazy (on the one hand), (and on the other hand) we are all a little bit crazy ... In Washington, DC it was crazy people like me – acting *k’ilu* and even with humility – who, almost 50 years ago, wrote the Civil Rights Legislation of 1964 and who, today, are helping to make health care affordable and accessible to all. Here in Portland, it is crazy people like you and me who acting *k’ilu* and even with humility who are going to make marriage equality a reality in our state and pass a budget that reflects our values of creating opportunities for all...Are you my partner?... Ani ma’amin, I believe. And you do to.

Shana Tovah!

⁷ Pirke Avot 2:15