



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Yom Kippur 5779/2018

Practitioner of Hope

Many of you know that I hail from the great City of Brotherly Love - Philadelphia! I love my hometown and even after nearly 30 years here in Virginia, I am undyingly loyal to it – not so much to the cheese steaks – but to the pretzels, the liberty bell, Ben Franklin and of course my Phillies, Eagles, Flyers and 76ers. In truth I'm not an enormous sports fan, but if you see me at Nationals Stadium or FedEx Field you know who I'll be rooting for - at my own peril. Except for the amazing Super Bowl win of our Eagles this past year; generally, the statistics aren't so good for the sporty Philadelphians among us. I once heard an announcer at a game say that to be a sports fan from Philly is to be a *practitioner of hope*.

It was a long time ago when I heard that phrase – *practitioner of hope*. For some reason it stuck with me. More - it took root in me and continues to resonate. Certainly, because I still love Philly, but perhaps more so because I've realized that to be a Jew is also to be a *practitioner of hope*. This notion was crystalized for me recently as I was preparing for today. I was studying a Talmud text about the idea of Judgment Day (yes, this is in Judaism). Yom Kippur is in many ways a rehearsal for that time, a mini judgment day, and so this text fit into my preparation.

In Tractate Shabbat, one of the great scholars, Rava, suggests that when we die and it is our Judgment Day, we will come before God and God will ask us 4 questions.

1. Were you honest in business?
2. Did you devote yourself to family?
3. Did you make time for sacred study? And one more –
4. *Tzipita Lishua* – literally did you anticipate redemption? Better in our terms, did you live with hope?

Now I understand why God would care if I supported my family or if I had professional integrity or if I engaged with our tradition through study. These are

concrete accomplishments and reflect some of Judaism's core values – family, economic justice, education. But what is so essential about living with hope? How is that a measure of my life's worth? What role does it play for me now and later in the metaphoric or real World to Come?

Just to be clear, Rava is surely not talking about the common use of hope that we toss around in the mundane moments of our lives – I hope the metro is on time. I hope I get a good grade on this test. I hope my matzah balls turn out light. Nor is it magic – I hope to be miraculously cured of my incurable condition. These are certainly legitimate desires, but this is not what the Talmud means when it asks, “Did you live with hope in your heart?” Hope is less of a wish list and more of an encompassing orientation towards life. To hope is to conceive of things turning out differently from how they might, to believe in the possibility of a more positive outcome. Real hope visualizes change, and once we see the possibility of something new, we are motivated to act to create the circumstances where hope can be realized.

So many of us are reaching for hope these days. Not in some Pollyannaish way, but in real time and in substantive terms. We seem to be living in a particularly violent and painful moment in human history. We are bombarded with news of gun violence; hate crimes, war and terrorism. I am still feeling the pain of Parkland. I am gutted thinking about children separated from parents. I want to be more confident that the era of #metoo is on its way out, but I am not feeling that way. From a more personal side, I see so many people I know and love struggling with illness – mental and physical. With each incident and each diagnosis, I try to open up the possibility of one change, one better circumstance. As a rabbi, I must be a *practitioner of hope*. As Jews, by birth, choice or affiliation, all of us are.

While surely we are not the only religion committed to hope, it is truly a part of our DNA. In his book [The Gift of the Jews](#), Thomas Cahill suggests that our Jewish tradition introduced to the world a fundamentally new conception of reality. The ancients believed that human destiny lay in the stars; they believed in fate, they believed that life on earth is cyclical and predetermined, except for the occasional intervention of capricious gods. Our bible and the beliefs that grew out of it, present

a different reality. Cahill explains that the Jewish God gave humanity free will thus rejecting determinism in favor of human agency. We have the ability to control our actions, to change what might appear inevitable; we have power and with power comes a mindset that anticipates and is responsible for a better future. British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks powerfully puts it, “The Greeks gave the world the concept of tragedy. Jews gave it the idea of hope. To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair.”

Consider one of the most formative moments in our people’s saga – the moment when Moses met God at the burning bush. Moses asks for God’s name and God responds, ‘*Ehyeh asher ehyeh.*’ So many translators get this wrong. They take this phrase to mean ‘I am what I am.’ But the words are in the future tense. The more likely translation is ‘I will be what I will be.’ God’s name belongs to things that are ahead of us. God’s call is to that which is not yet. If we fail to understand this, we will miss the very thing that makes Judaism unique. A tradition that embraces the future tense is a tradition hardwired towards hope.

I assume most of you have heard of TED talks – those 20-minute monologues where people share inspiring stories or insightful discoveries. There is a Jewish version of these called ELI talks. A colleague of mine, whom I’ve known for many years, recently stepped onto the ELI stage to talk about her divorce. Only 50 years old, with three kids, she didn’t see it coming and she didn’t want her marriage to end, but it did. The talk was labeled as one on Jewish ritual. But as I listened, I realized it was about so much more.

This rabbi recognized that she needed a way to mark the unexpected and unwanted ending of her marriage. She created a ritual where she and her closest friends went to a local body of water, and used it as a mikvah. She immersed herself the traditional 3 times and after each dunking said a blessing: first – for the ritual of immersion, saying “I acknowledge that tradition can help me now.” Second – she recited the Shema saying, “even if I don’t feel God these days, I know God is and will be with me.” And finally, third, she said *Shehekeyanu* – that prayer for happy and special occasions. When I heard her describe this from the ELI stage, I was perplexed; this was not a happy occasion for her. And then it became clear. Even in

the midst of this huge and sad challenge, there was the possibility of something new, something meaningful and even joy. There was hope. To be a Jew is to say the *Shehekeyanu* even from the depths of hard times. On judgment day, when this rabbi comes before God and is asked those 4 questions, she will respond, 'tzipiti l'shua – yes, I lived with hope.'

Sharing so much with all of you throughout our nearly 30 years together, I have learned that no life escapes such moments; at some point each of us find ourselves facing the abyss. Everyone here has a personal story of a profoundly life altering experience, of a tragic loss or, like my friend, of an unexpected and unwanted circumstance. Minor or significant, personal or communal, we are constantly navigating life's challenges. I know some among us are facing life-threatening circumstances at this very moment. How much we all want to support you through this hard time. We want to walk with you as you endure this journey. You and all of us need resilience just to make it through each week and each year. Hope is the fabric of that resilience.

Before saying more, allow me to clarify a common confusion about hope and its cousins – faith and optimism. The three are different, although they impact one another and at times build off of the other. Optimism focuses more broadly on the expected quality of future outcomes. Hope focuses more directly on attaining specific goals. Optimism is the general belief that things are going to get better. Hope is the belief that if we work hard enough, together we might make things better. There is also a distinction between faith and hope. Faith awaits some unanticipated divine initiative or intervention. It is theocentric – God oriented. Hope is anthropocentric – centered on us. To be a *practitioner of hope* from a Jewish perspective is to recognize a place for God's plan in the goal setting, but to leave much of the 'getting there' to us.

This brings us back to Rava and the 4 questions that we will be asked on Judgment Day. As I said before, the first 3 make sense. Procession through the heavenly gates is seemingly dependent on what we do during our lives – the 'getting there' of our actions. We better the world through our honest work; we better others through our devotion to them; and we better ourselves through study. Once

again, we wonder how question 4 - *tzipita l'shua* – Are you living with hope - fits into the set. If hope is simply an orientation, a vantage point, a filter, if hope is something that we believe rather than something that we do, then why is it on the list?

In Hebrew, *Tikvah* is the word for hope. *Tikvah* is a noun. When you turn *Tikvah* into a verb it becomes *mikaveh* – hoping. For those of you who have been studying Hebrew in one of our many classes, you may notice this word is not in the simple verb classification, rather, this verb in the group called *pi'el* or the classification for verbs with intense activity. The grammar says it all. Hope is not a simple task; it is a deeply engaging demanding deed. It belongs in Rava's list because like the other items there, hope is indeed an action. Jewish hope energizes and mobilizes us. When we hope, we visualize change, and seeing the possibility of something new, we are motivated to act to create the circumstances where that hope can be realized.

Here is one of my favorite stories that captures this understanding of hope. A number of years after TRS was founded, there was a congregational meeting to discuss the possibility of buying the land where we are today. The congregation had begun to grow and many people could see it blossoming even more with a permanent presence in Fairfax County. At the meeting 51% of the people voted to buying the land. The leadership and Rabbi Berkowits wisely felt that this wasn't enough support to move forward. However, five families could visualize the success of this new Jewish community in Falls Church. On their own, they acted; they bought the land and held it until the congregation was ready to buy it from them, ready to create the sacred space we enjoy today. They were our *practitioners of hope*, creating the circumstances for our future prospect to be realized.

How grateful we are that in every generation, and especially over the last year, so many families have continued this tradition of embracing hope and building for our congregation's future.

Getting us into the mindset of hope and engaged with the actions that fulfill it, is what we are here to do today; it is the very work of Yom Kippur. Yes, from first glance this Day of Atonement appears to be about our sins, about forgiveness, the Book of Life, hunger and halitosis. But if we look just a bit deeper into the prayers

and the readings, we see that this day is really about the possibility for something better and the power to make that happen. Our main theme, Teshuvah, is about turning, changing and redirecting. Teshuvah permeates all of our High Holy Days and it says that none of us are stuck in one place – ever. We have the ability to create new realities and that is a message of hope. We can begin again – in relationships, in our profession, in our view of the world or even our view of ourselves. Yes, we are called to take responsibility for our past actions but while imposing maximum responsibility on the individual, Judaism also gives us maximum hope.

The signature prayer of these holidays is the *Une Tane Tokef* - on Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed... In its opening lines, we are reminded that there is plenty in the world over which we have no control. Yet the words also tell us that we are far from powerless. While God writes in the book of life, each of us provides the material for the chapters. God writes, and we write; God seals and we seal. And even when the writing is not so neat or the story not so good, we are given a chance to create a possibility for another ending.

Thomas Cahill, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and Rava all understood a deep truth about hope. It is more than a mindset; it is the driver for meaning and purpose in our lives. It is the fabric of the resilience we need and the fuel for the actions that express our values and create positive change.

Hope is a verb and the more you experience it, the more it takes root in you. The more it takes root in you, the more you do to actualize the change you envision. The more you actualize that change, the more you improve the world. The more you improve the world, the more you secure your place in the World to Come. At the end of our lives, when we are asked, *'Tzipita L'shua*, did you live with hope?' Let us all say, YES!

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Falls Church, Virginia
5779-2018

