**YOM KIPPUR 5783**

***SACRED IMAGINATION***

My neighbors have a sign in their front yard – THE BEST IS YET TO COME! Not long ago, standing on the street, we chatted about it. The message is, of course, an affirmation of their belief in the return of Jesus to this world and the transformation that will come with this Messianic moment. I was interested in their sign because as I see it there each day, walking my dog or driving by, I wonder (as I have for years and maybe you have too) what does it feel like to believe THE BEST IS YET TO COME? To feel so confident in a Messiah or Messianic Age? To look with profound joy to what’s ahead. Ever open and warm, Chris and Emma, and even teenage Tim, were curious about my interest in their sign. *What does Judaism say about the Messiah? How does your tradition see the future? You do believe in Eternal Life, don’t you?*

I took a deep breath…. How much time do you have???.... It’s a long story!

I imagine many of you have found yourselves in this conversation. (*Right?*) A Christian friend, very comfortable with and committed to their beliefs, wants to know where you and Judaism are in this BEST IS YET TO COME conversation. We try as well as we can to respond to this notion. But let’s face it, we mostly struggle. This is not a topic about which we are particularly comfortable, nor one we focus on, nor, for many of us, one we even believe. And yet, I wonder, how our lives, our actions, our commitments, might be different if we embraced such an optimistic view of the future? I confess, I am not announcing THE BEST IS YET TO COME from my front yard, but if I were to put up a sign, what would I want it to say?

Judaism and its ideas of the future begin with our earliest beliefs about the Messiah. Allow me a brief moment to share a short version of this information. I promise that this is not a long lecture and the next time you are asked these tough questions from your friends you can just click on this sermon for a quick response. *Here’s what you need to know….*

First, there is no concept of the Messiah in the Torah. Our ancestors, journeying from Egyptian slavery to the freedom of their Promised Land, had no need for a redeemer or future redemption because they lived it! Their day had already arrived.

The next thing to know, is that Judaism’s Messianic ideas (which evolved into Christianity’s messianic ideas) come from our prophets. They lived at a time when the Israelites experienced the destruction of their temple and holy city. As a people now in exile, they needed hope, which the prophets provided in the vision of a future leader who would return them to their homeland and bring security and peace to all the world. Some of the images are beautiful and inspiring. Think - swords to plowshares! The lion and lamb lying down together! Definitely something to look forward to!

To this very day, traditional (Orthodox) Judaism has a strong connection to these ideas. For them, the Messiah is a real person who will gather all Jews together and create a peaceful world without suffering. Observing the mitzvot, the commandments, paves the way for HIS arrival. My husband Kevin, raised in an orthodox community in London, was taught that when every Jew in the world observes shabbat for two consecutive weeks, the Messiah will come! I imagine the sign on his rabbi’s lawn – THE BEST IS TWO SHABBATS AWAY!

And yet, even the traditional community struggles on some level. The first century scholar, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai once said, “*If you should happen to be holding a sapling in your hand and you hear that the Messiah has arrived, first plant the sapling and then go look for the Messiah.”* And there is an old Jewish story that tells of a Russian Jew who is paid one ruble a month by the community council to stand at the edge of town to be the first person to greet the Messiah upon his arrival. *When a friend said to him, “But the pay is so low…” the man replied, “Yes, but the job is permanent!”*

So, if you are skeptical, if you struggle with this belief, you are in good company. Which leads us to our community – the Reform Movement. Born in an age of rationalism and science, our founders rejected the idea of a personal Messiah and reoriented our Movement toward a Messianic Age. Just as the prophets describe, this will be a time when the world will be at peace, suffering eradicated, justice for all.

But the distinct feature of our Messianic Age is that it will be achieved entirely by US. For our community THE BEST IS YET TO COME depends on humanity taking responsibility for our own redemption. From this belief, our commitment to Tikkun Olam – Repairing the World - was born. From Social Action to advocacy, projects and to protests, we have become the Movement of Tikkun Olam. And in Reform Judaism, Tikkun Olam paves the way for the Messianic Age.

As today is a day for honesty, perhaps it might be more honest to say, “In Reform Judaism, Tikkun Olam paves the way for the Messianic Age… *possibly*.” Don’t get me wrong, I believe in Tikkun Olam! I practice it. I aspire to do more of it! I’m so proud and grateful to every member of this community who makes Tikkun Olam their priority, who lives and breathes the Jewish commitment to respond to the needs of those on the fringes of society, who care for our earth, who fight for more just policies in our country – the list goes on. Thank you!

But let’s face it – while we believe in the efficacy of Tikkun Olam to better today’s world, I’m not sure we can or even try to visualize its impact very far into the future. Our tradition demands we address the ills that are before us, and there is no question that we must tackle our troubles and defeat our injustices and save our planet now! Yet the result is - we have become so laser focused on today and tomorrow, we neither see nor act for what will come next, what will come farther down the road, what will come long after us.

Think Climate Change. We know we need to do more - take more impactful measures - but while the most extreme effects of climate change are not immediately in our sight, we don’t act beyond what we know. We can’t see beyond our own lives and our own needs. Our inability to look ahead and prevent what is yet to come, will no doubt devastate our descendants. Today, the sign we have might say, THE BEST IS THE FUTURE I CAN SEE!

I wonder if we, progressive, modern Jews, have become so enamored with the rational, so embedded in the practical, so fixated on the here and now, that we have squelched our sacred imagination[[1]](#endnote-1). It appears that when we rejected our tradition’s version of a personal messiah, we also surrendered our connection to and even anticipation of a wholly repaired, wholly complete, albeit distant vision of the future. The sacred imagination that our prophets bestowed upon the ancient Israelites, gave them a sense of agency and hope, and invited them to look ahead, beyond their own lifetimes and imagine something better. What a gift!

Imagination is powerful. It can be transformative. Scott Russell Sanders says it best. “Imagination breaks the shell of the status quo, summoning up objects that do not yet exist, actions that no one has yet performed and wise ways of living that have yet to be realized.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Pair this with our tradition which calls us to holiness and justice, love and compassion and you have sacred imagination.

A community that might teach us and inspire us to reconnect to our own sacred imagination is the Indigenous American community. Have you heard of the 7th Generation Principle? This principle is part of the founding document of the Iroquois Confederation. It states that every decision made by the Confederation must incorporate the impact of that decision on 7 generations into the future. It says, *“in all of your official acts, self-interest shall be cast into oblivion…look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in your view, not only the present, but also the coming (7) generations.”* Imagine them! They are real and they are our responsibility.

This is hard!

I know it’s difficult to think into the far-off future. Sometimes I feel so beaten down by the litany of disasters and impending catastrophes that I see every morning, I don’t think I have the emotional or intellectual bandwidth to imagine a better next-week let alone a better next-century. The problem is – without a vision of that world, we don’t feel a connection to that world, and without a connection to that world, we don’t feel a responsibility to that world. Maybe the sign I’m looking for says, THE BEST IS OURS TO IMAGINE!

But is it enough just to imagine it? How do we turn imagined futures into action?

Just two weeks ago, as I was working through these very ideas, I read an article in the Washington Post about a community that has invoked their sacred imagination to profoundly and positively impact their future.[[3]](#endnote-3) William MacAskill shared the story of Yahaba, a rural town in Northern Japan. They had a costly water supply problem and the only way to fix it required a significant increase in taxes. But the community could not reach consensus on a way forward that didn’t compromise their own immediate interests. To break the deadlock, they did something unusual, something inspiring. They donned ceremonial yellow robes and underwent a kind of mental “time travel.” Together they imagined that they were residents of the year 2060 facing a water sustainability crisis brought on by their ancestors. Struck by the vividness of this vision, they reached agreement: They would raise the water tax 6%. While a financial hardship for many, this would ‘future proof’ the supply.

I wonder what they, in those yellow robes, imagined. Did they picture the faces of their progeny? Or maybe feel the anger that this generation might have felt because of their inaction? Or maybe they imagined that babies couldn’t be bathed, and no water, meant no gardens. Whatever it was, it clearly was powerful and transformative. While imagining life 40 years from now is not so hard, I think we can learn from their creative use of ritual to connect to future generations, envision their impact and act differently as a result. Perhaps you wonder, as I do, what their decision might have been if they tried to look ahead not 40 years but 400.

Might we try this out? Could we invoke some sacred imagination ourselves? What might it be like if each of us focused on one thing about which we care deeply. One thing about which we are passionate. One thing we know needs our attention and support now but also likely for a very long time. What’s your issue? Trees, bees, homelessness, malaria, cancer, equality for all women, education? Pick just one of the many causes you support and put on your version of a ceremonial yellow robe and throw yourself 7 generations into the future and imagine – as hard as it is – imagine - and paint the best picture you can for that future. Engage your sacred imagination to dream of something far off. As Scott Russell Sanders would say –*a wiser way of living that has yet to be realized*. This is part of our messianic age.

My picture is one of children, fit and healthy. Children who do not know hunger, no thin bodies with bulging bellies – anywhere, ever. If I, in my mind’s eye, were to return to this picture often; if I truly owned this image and let it energize me, perhaps my sacred imagination might deepen my actions, maybe I would take do something bold – change all of my investments, visit the communities where malnutrition is widespread, broaden my tikkun olam and secure a reality that something BETTER IS YET TO COME.

This message that the power of a sacred imagination could strengthen our connection to a better future and fuel our already meaningful work of tikkun olam, even reconnect us to something (dare I say) Messianic, is here with us now.

Today’s Torah portion, chosen for this holiest day of the year, attests to Judaism’s commitment to future generations. The Israelites are standing with Moses, being reminded of the covenant God has made with them at Mount Sinai. (Deuteronomy 29:14) *“I make this covenant…not with you alone, not only with you who are standing here this day, but also with those who are not (yet) here”* – meaning us and our descendants. I cannot tell you if this event actually took place. If it did happen, it would have been over 3 thousand years ago. 3 thousand years ago, our ancestors were asked to think about us.

Can you picture this? Did someone standing in that crowd imagine me? Maybe she couldn’t predict what my life would be like, but did she visualize my face and care about my safety hoping I had a life far away from the heat of the desert and the dangers of the wilderness? Today as we read this passage, we affirm that we are connected to a community that transcends time. And we, like our ancestors, are called to imagine our descendants, even 3 thousand years from now, and to care about them – their safety and their happiness and their lives.

Is THE BEST YET TO COME? I admit that despite my desire to push beyond our this-worldly, rational, practical Judaism, I continue to struggle. But I want to post a sign in my front yard that shows I both care about the future and understand my responsibility to it.

I believe we can expand the reach of our tikkun olam.

We can not only believe in but shape a better world.

I want to act inspired by insights born from my sacred imagination!

Look for my sign. It says,

THE BEST IS OURS TO IMAGINE, THE BEST IS OURS TO CREATE!

*Ken y’hi ratzon – May it be so!*

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1. Thank you, Rabbi Elissa Sachs-Kohen, for this phrase [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in: Imagining a Better World by Bill Lueders [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Washington Post, Sunday September 18, 2022 “Want Politics to Better? Focus on Future Generations “by William MacAskill [↑](#endnote-ref-3)