

ROSH HASHANAH 5785

Tikvah, Kav – our way to Hope, our way to the Future

There is one Jewish holiday that I never observe.

It falls in the summer, usually in July. On the Hebrew calendar, it takes place on the 9th day of the month of Av – and thus its name – Tisha (the 9th) B'Av (of Av.)

Tisha B'Av is a Jewish day of mourning. According to tradition, both the First and Second Temples were destroyed on this day, and throughout Jewish history, other tragic events have landed on this spot in the calendar. The rituals of this observance bespeak deep sadness. We fast. We sit on the ground without our shoes. We cry and wail. Aloud, we read the biblical Book of Lamentations – a book of poetic dirges that depict the anguish of Jerusalem destroyed and her people exiled.

I have skipped Tisha B'Av for most of my life because, well, I have never felt the need to mourn for the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem. I don't grieve the end of animal sacrifice, which was the primary practice of Judaism then, nor the Temple's elitist and, at times, corrupt priesthood. Further, Judaism teaches that while we observe a *yahrzeit* each year for the people we have loved and lost, mourning has a beginning and an end, and, in my mind, that should apply to the great Temple in Jerusalem as well. And so, Tisha B'Av, for me, has been like any other summer day.

Until this year.

Since we gathered last High Holy Days, our people - as individuals, as a community, and as a nation - have suffered profound and painful, life-changing loss. The events of October 7th, the horrific actions of Hamas, were barbaric, brutal, and devastating.

And -- all that transpired from October 8th until today - to the Israeli people, to the Palestinian people, to us, the American Jewish community, to Jews around the world, all of it has also been harrowing and heartbreaking.

Tisha B'av suddenly felt so relevant, its observance so timely and essential. The Hebrew name of the Book of Lamentations is *Eicha*, from the word *Ech*, meaning 'how.' All

year, I have been saying this word - HOW! How did this happen? *Eicha* - HOW is this happening? *Eicha* – HOW will we recover from all the catastrophic events that have happened to us and by us this past year?

Lamentations begins (v. 1-2) (Cantor quietly chants *Eicha* in the background.) “*Eicha yosh-va vaded Ha-ir* - How ...lonely... sits the city...which was once great among nations and is now a widow. Bitterly, she weeps in the night. There are no friends to comfort her. All her allies have betrayed her; they have become her foes.” (v. 5) “Her children have gone into captivity.” (v. 7) “When her people fell by enemy hands, with none to help her, rivals looked on and gloated at her downfall.”

On and on the anguished verses go, and I feel the pain and loss of both the past and of the present like a rock in my chest. This year, I have cried and worried; I have felt abandoned; I have been anxious and deeply troubled. I have been angry and conflicted and felt despair. *Eicha* – Lamentations put words to my feelings and to our experience as a people.

I confess that the last time I read this book in its entirety was 39 years ago, my first year of rabbinic school in Jerusalem. That year, in my early 20s, living in a peaceful Israel with so many exciting things ahead of me, I felt no connection to this book. And, understandably, I didn’t notice what I now see as its most important sentence - one line that sits in the middle of the middle chapter. A sentence that, this year, jumped off the page. A verse that reminds us that, as we have done so many times in our history, we can emerge from this chaos and find a path to safety and wholeness and peace.

In the middle of middle chapter (Chpt 3 v. 29), we read:

אוֹלֵי יֵשׁ תִּקְוָה - There may yet be hope.

Oo-lie – (one of my favorite Hebrew words) – Perhaps!

Yesh – there exists

Tikvah – that famous word we’ve come to know as Hope.

At first, I hesitated to share this line with you. Hope, in our world, is often so trite. It's Pollyannaish. We tell others to 'just have hope' when they are facing challenging situations. Often, we invoke this simplistic optimism to merely soothe our own anxiety. This is not the hope I am talking about today. The kind of hope I want to lift up is a nuanced, complex hope that holds pain and grief alongside conflict and contradiction. This hope will guide us into the future.

My search for insight led me, as it often does, to the Hebrew. Tikvah is our well-known word, meaning hope. (Like Israel's national anthem—Ha-Tikvah—the Hope.) Remarkably, as is so often the case, Hebrew gifts us with helpful and astute insights that one cannot see or feel in the English.

As some of you know, every Hebrew word has at its center a three-letter root with a distinct meaning. Many words can be formed around this root, all of which hold or are connected to that distinct meaning. At the center of the word Tikvah are the letters Koof-vav. Which spell KAV. And the distinct meaning of that root, KAV, (interestingly) is rope.

You may wonder how one gets from the root rope to the word hope. While you can see the letters of Kav inside the word Tikvah, you may be perplexed, as I was, because the connection between these words isn't apparent. In English, hope is an idea or a sentiment, perhaps an emotion. But in Hebrew, with Kav as its root, Tikvah is concrete; it is tangible, even graspable, and most importantly, it's instructive.

Visualize a rope! If you look closely in your mind's eye, you see not only the braided strands but the twisted fibers or yarns that make up those strands. (Can you picture it?) Looking into this, I learned that not only is a rope formed by the braiding of the large stands, the strength of the rope is achieved when the many smaller fibers or yarns that make up the strand are twisted against each other in the opposite directions. In turn, these many stands are twisted yet again in an opposite direction to create the final product, the rope.

I was initially drawn to this image of a rope because since October 7th, with all that has happened in Israel, in Gaza, here in America, I have felt a great deal of despair. About the future of Israel and even our American Jewry, in some ways, I feel I've been hanging on

by a thread, a very thin kav. I spent much of the year grasping for Kavim – for strings or maybe lifelines. But now, in the root Kav, I see that the Tikvah, the hope I have been looking for, doesn't come from grasping at ropes I can or cannot reach but rather from the configuration of the rope itself.

Rabbi Lia Bass, our neighbor, and a weaver and fabric artist, helped me further understand this because she makes her own yarn. She explained, “The best yarns are created by mixing different materials. Wool is great, but it gets warmer when mixed with alpaca, smoother when mixed with silk, and stronger when mixed with cotton. Once spun, you twist the strands together. The tension created improves the durability of the yarn, ensuring an end-product that is both flexible and strong.”

If, at the end of what has been the most challenging Jewish year of our recent history, we are looking for Tikvah, hope that there will be a vibrant and just future, we must lean into the kav, the rope, that can hold us together not by its singularity or uniformity but through the multiplicity of fibers and the tension between them that are needed to give it its greatest resilience, plasticity, and strength. Oo-lie yesh Tikvah.

Throughout this year, I have shared my personal views on the tragedy in Israel and Gaza. I have preached and posted. I have sent emails and signed petitions. In official messages, the Temple has published the views of the Reform Movement, but we have also posted resources that span a wide variety of opinions on the many dimensions of the conflict. In February, Cantor Michaeli and I led a trip to Israel, where we met with Jewish Israelis from the right and left, humanitarian workers, and Palestinians. Some of you did not think that this trip hit the right notes, and others did. Our goal was to connect with the full spectrum of values held within our community. In March, I, in my personal capacity, joined hundreds of rabbis and cantors in signing a letter calling for a ceasefire and the return of the hostages. Some of you were upset by this; some of you were pleased. In the variety of programs we have hosted since October 7th, many of you have shared a range of beliefs about Israelis and Palestinians, about security and peace, about social justice and Zionism.

I believe that this is the way it should be. Our varied opinions, in tension with each other, are what will create a kav strong enough to pull us into the future and flexible enough to withstand the uncertain forces that are ahead. We need diversity in our ply. A single strand leads to a weak rope. The friction that comes when your views rub against mine is healthy. This resistance slows us down, it holds us in each other's company, it forces us to look at each other, to hear each other. We may not agree, but in the grip, we can't walk away. This is what it means to be a sacred community. This is why I have remained tied to this congregation for 34 years. At times, I have felt stretched, once in a while, knotted up, but more often than not, this sacred congregation- all of you- has been my lifeline.

From the sacred (our wonderful community here) to the secular (the world out there) – I'm not the only one encouraging investment in diversity for communal benefits. Have you heard about the new documentary Join or Die? (Intriguing title, right?) It's by one of America's great social scientists – Robert Putnam. You may remember his award-winning book about community called Bowling Alone. In his new work, Putnam discusses the importance of social capital – specifically, two types. One he calls Bonding Capital and the other he calls Bridging Capital. Bonding Capital comes about when I hang out with people like me – short rabbis...lovers of Philadelphia...pie makers. Here, I build relationships in a comfortable space with people who share my hobbies and values. Bridging Capital is a different animal – that's what I gain from being with people who are unlike me, who don't share my interests or perspectives, individuals who may differ not only in sports teams and religion but also race, socio-economic status, and political or social views.

Putnam suggests that the strength of a society, like the strength of a rope, is directly related to the ability of its members to have both types of capital. I turn to the people in my Bonding group when I need chicken soup or a ride to the Phillies game. I turn to my Bridging group when I need to learn how others see things so that we can successfully cooperate, especially in public spaces. At their best, people bring curiosity and tolerance and empathy to the table, which can lead to unexpected partnerships, sharing of resources, new ideas.

When disparate views can be heard and respected, the friction they create can be a source of warmth and energy and even fuel for a more dynamic community. Oo-lie yesh Tikvah!

In terms of our shared commitment to this Jewish community, Temple Rodef Shalom mostly gives us Bonding Capital. This past year, we have needed one another like never before. But we are varied in so many dimensions, especially now in terms of what we bring to the conversation about Israel and its future. Creating Bridging Capital, holding diverse fibers in our shared cord, is also critical to our successful future. Everyone in this room is a necessary thread in the rope our congregation needs to be strong.

Allow me to zero in on our kav, where the most disparate strands relate to views about Israel. So many views are intertwined in our Rodef Shalom community – this is where we are a Bridging group. Among our threads, we have people who grew up in the 50's and 60's. The Israel of their formative years was the underdog-Israel, winning wars against a long list of countries who wanted to destroy it. They knew Ben Gurion and Golda and Peres. We also have other threads who grew up in much different circumstances. My own children have only known Bibi, Bibi and Bibi. They've heard the words like occupation and intifada as much as they have heard kibbutz and falafel. Their relationship with Israel is profoundly different than mine - an Israel with many peaceful and productive years, or than that of my parents - an Israel that was a critical response to the Holocaust.

As there have been throughout Jewish history, within our kav are individuals who identify as Zionists. Actually, many different kinds of Zionists. There are Political Zionists – who believe the Jewish state and its government are indispensable to the future of the Jewish people. There are Cultural Zionists who believe the art, literature, music, and traditions that emerge specifically from living in our homeland will enrich all Jews. There are Labor Zionists who worked to build the kibbutzim. Many of us here are Progressive Zionists who hope to be in relationship with Israel while holding liberal democratic values. Let's not forget the troubled Zionists, deeply committed to our Israel and often troubled by her actions. And finally, there are non-Zionists.

Allow me to say a few words about this last group. There are a growing number of Jews, particularly those in our younger generation, who feel that the values and principles of social justice we taught them are irreconcilable with the civilian Palestinian suffering they witness. This has led them to reject Israel's policies and even to reject Israel itself and most Zionist ideas. The views of non-Zionists, some of whom call themselves Post Zionists and some anti-Zionists, are complex, varied, sometimes based on a knowledge of history and politics, sometimes on broader trends and categorizations. Even if we disagree vehemently, we cannot allow the members of this group to be lost from our nuclear families, our extended families, this congregational family, and the Jewish people. Many of us are heartbroken by their purging of this elemental component of our people's narrative – our first home that Jews have lived in and died for thousands of years, our historic and spiritual home that holds a sense of safety for many of us. It might feel counterintuitive, but we must make room in the braids of our rope for these people, too. Their strand may be chafing ours, but we need them close enough to hear and near enough to hold. They are part of the Jewish future, and their kav sits, as ours does, in the middle of the word and idea of Tikvah.

Holding so many strands at once is hard. And, of course, there are limits. Our rope cannot contain strands of hatred, racism, misogyny, or bigotry. That's fundamental! Nonetheless, for some, holding multiple conflicting ideas, even truths, at the same time can feel like cognitive dissonance. It is challenging to live with tension and friction. But we have no choice. Our Kav sits in the middle of our Tikvah grammatically, symbolically, and in real-time. Hope for the future has as its core an intertwined and varied rope which we can't let fray.

Let me end where I began, with the observance of the deeply mournful day of Tisha B'av. There is a midrash, a creative interpretation, that brings these many ideas full circle. This Midrash nestles itself right next to those three words that I only noticed this year, those words of hope sitting in the middle of the saddest book of the Bible. The Midrash declares that the messiah, that person or movement or idea, metaphoric or real, whose purpose is to usher in an age of peace, justice, kindness, and love, that ultimate symbol of hope, our

messiah, will be born on Tisha B'av. Hope will come on our day of loss and sorrow. Tikvah will emerge from brokenness and despair, pulling us from the depths, gifting us new growth and a better future. Let us hold on to the rope. Let us weave ourselves into the kav.

Oo-lie yesh Tikvah.

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman

Temple Rodef Shalom

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