

Hope Coursing Through Us

Rosh Hashanah 5767

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At the start of the summer, my daughter, Lilah Rose broke her arm. Monkey Bars. She spent most of the summer in a cast. But when it finally came off, among the first things Lilah wanted to do was -- get back on the monkey bars. I'm so grateful that this incident did not instill a fear of physical challenges.

During the early days of recovery, we had several *bikkur holim* visits with friends and family. One friend, Lilah's godmother, gave her a shiny, colorful balloon to cheer her up. On the drive home, Lilah asked to have her window open. And without a moment's thought, down went the window and out went the balloon.

Naturally, Lilah began to cry and cry and nothing we could do or say seemed to console her. How could it be that the balloon was irretrievable? Where did it go? Why couldn't we get it back? Why couldn't we fix this great injustice? Nor protect her from this seemingly unbearable loss?

I have been captivated by her sadness and anger. And the part that's been most intense for me is watching her figure out a defensive strategy against being hurt this way, again. She has decided simply to never have another balloon. No more balloons!

Interesting emotional formula; No attachment = No loss. If you don't want to get hurt again, disappointed again, don't take another chance. With this rite of passage, Lilah lost her balloon, but she lost more than that. She lost a bit of her innocence. She learned through disappointment and grief that to love something or someone means to be vulnerable to that

which is ephemeral, unpredictable, impermanent, finite. “’Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch,” pens an anonymous poet.

I so empathize with Lilah’s experience of loss. Over and over in my life, people I love have disappointed me; ideals I once cherished have come to seem foolish. And people I love die before they should. Almost reflexively, it has seemed like the surest way to protect my heart from getting broken would be to close myself off to further pain.

Yes, there is always insecurity and fragility to life. Diseases weaken us; drunk or drugged drivers threaten our safety, as does the angry or deranged gunman; whether by accident, act of nature, or act of evil, our very existence is always uncertain.

We Jews are asked to confront life’s fragility head-on during these Days of Awe. We intone *Mi Yich’yeh Umi Yamut? Who Shall Live and Who Shall die?* followed by a catalogue of gruesome ways one might meet one’s end. That list has power even for those of us who reject a simplistic reading of its theology; even for those of us who know that the world is far more complex than one in which sinners suffer and the righteous are rewarded.

Given the apparently random way in which we are dealt our deck, it is truly amazing that any of us enter into intimate relationships at all. If at the age of four, [actually it’s probably even earlier], we are already thinking up ways to protect ourselves against future losses, it’s a wonder that we ever take the risk to make friends, fall in love, let alone negotiate peace treaties.

So, what can help us move through our anxiety about loss and through the real grief that comes when we do have our hearts broken? I think it is the promise of hope. Hope contains spectacular power, as though it captured bits of the bursting energy of Creation. It is a natural source located deep within every one of us. It’s curative forces enable us to transform our

cynicism and resist surrender. Often, Hope appears in the loving acts we do for others and that others do for us.

According to rabbinic legend, the Messiah will be born on Tisha B' Av, the saddest day of the year, the day that commemorates the greatest national calamities in Jewish history, when Jerusalem was destroyed, not once but twice.¹ On this very day, the Messiah, the one anointed by God to usher in the age of unprecedented peace, will be born. This points to a powerful and abiding hopefulness, one deeply embedded in the Jewish soul. God plants the seeds of hope on the bleakest of days, when hope is most needed.

As a rabbi, I have always felt that I have a duty to be hopeful, to believe in our potential, that we can and do make positive contributions. Yes, I believe that despite the fact that the world is unfair – indeed, because the world is unfair and unkind -- we are called to do justice and to show kindness; and that is the purpose for which we were created. I believe that because the world breaks our hearts, we have a responsibility to help one another. I believe that our deeds matter, and that we stand accountable for the lives we live. This is my hopeful stance.

And yet, to be honest, I think this has been a hell of a hard year even for the most optimistic among us. As we look beyond our individual lives, we feel appalled by the world's catastrophes. Starting with the carnage in Iraq. The estimates are astounding: 2,455 Americans and over 100,000 Iraqi civilians have died since the war began. I heard this week that one hundred civilians die each day in Baghdad alone and that somewhere between 19,000 and 48,000 Americans are expected to return without arms, legs, or eyes.

Add this to the horror of the AIDS epidemic in India, Africa, Russia, and China. During 2005 around four million adults and children became infected with HIV. By the end of the year, an estimated 38.6 million people worldwide will be living with HIV/AIDS. The year also saw about three million deaths from AIDS, despite recent improvements in access to anti-retro-viral treatment. Africa alone has **12 million** AIDS orphans.

On top of this, we see the savage killing in Darfur erupting again. The Sudanese government's systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing has forced more than 21,000 people to flee from their homes just in the last two months. The American Jewish World Service reports that 15,000 people die every month in Darfur.

I wish that was the end of the litany but there is more horror to bear: We are witnessing the rise in militant fundamentalism, Anti-Semitism, Anti-Arabism, and Terrorism. We have a president, who is trying to erode America's deeply-held convictions that torture is reprehensible. And lastly, though this accounting is far from comprehensive, there was the recent war in Israel and Lebanon, as well as increased violence in Gaza. With the immense amount of human suffering on this planet, it is hard to feel anything but despair these days.

And so, while I don't want to be defeated by this despair, as your rabbi, I must be honest and tell you, the events in the world are threatening to crush my heart, bend my spirit, and erode my hope. I begin to doubt whether there really are peaceful solutions to the world's ills.

¹ This year, Tisha B'Av, August 2-3, found us in a time of crisis, with all eyes turned towards Israel.

I felt especially discouraged while in Israel this summer during the war. Not only because of the grim realities of the war, but also seeing the geo-political realities of the security wall and the growing Jewish neighborhoods and settlements in contested territory. I begin to question whether a two-state solution can be brought to bear, when both sides seem so wrong-headed.

In truth, I can't see how we are going to get from here to there. I can't picture it. And yet, I know I cannot give into despair. I know we cannot, must not flee from our ideals.

Jews come from a tradition that doesn't encourage escapism. It commands us to acknowledge the pain, injustice and strife all around us, and simultaneously cultivates in us an intense yearning for justice, goodness and peace. This combination inevitably produces dissatisfaction with the world. Dissatisfaction is a necessary religious trait for Jews. It's the engine that motivates us to want to change the world and make it better. If poverty and suffering don't make us upset, then we haven't internalized what Judaism has to teach.

But here's the important part. While dissatisfaction with the world is essential to a Jewish life, sadness and depression are not. In fact, our tradition sees sadness as the enemy of the good life, the very antithesis of the life Judaism tries to bring about. Torah itself commands happiness; it is a religious obligation for Jews, as stated in the book of Deuteronomy: "You shall rejoice in all the good that God has given you" [Dt.26:11]. There are many ways to encounter this goodness, some of them unexpected, unlikely, even perhaps, miraculous.

This morning's Torah portion tells the story of Hagar and Ishmael, cast into the wilderness by Abraham and Sarah; it is the account of a mother, who reaches rock bottom, giving up all hope that she can keep her son alive in the desert, with their meager supply of water used up. In distress and agony, Hagar casts² the boy under a bush, sits a distance away, and weeps aloud, "I will not look on as the child dies." It is at this moment of despair that Hagar hears the voice of a Godly messenger.

In contrast to Hagar's anguish, the heavenly voice is gentle, almost nonchalant—in Hebrew, he says, "*ma lach, Hagar?*" This could be translated most literally as "what's with you, Hagar?" The divine messenger seems to be implying that Hagar is premature in her distress. He goes on to tell her not to be afraid—a lovely play on words, for the words for "sight" and for "fear" are very similar in Hebrew. When the angel says "do not be afraid," "*al-tiri,*" he is both evoking and negating Hagar's statement, "*al-ereh,*" "I will not look on." The suggestion here is that Hagar's eyes have been closed with fear. When she is able to open them again, she sees a well of water—a well that does not miraculously appear, but has been there all along, unseen, waiting to be found.

The miracle that God performed for Hagar and Ishmael is very subtle. God didn't place a well in Hagar's path. The only miracle God performed was to open Hagar's eyes so she could see what had been standing before her all along. The well had been there from the start but she felt too defeated to see it.

"Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand," instructs the angel, -- *v'ha-kha-ziki et yadiekh bo --- shoresh is khazak* -- grasp your hand in his -

² The Hebrew is "tashlich" as in Tashlich, the Rosh Hashanah ritual of casting out our sins.

- "strengthen" your hand in his -- says the messenger, as if to say the strength to hope comes from grasping the hand of another -- parent, child or some other relationship -- our strength comes through the hand of the other or through holding on to another.

New beginnings are often unexpected. They occur at a threshold where the old is passing away and we don't yet know what is going to happen. We may think that life is coming to an end, like Hagar, who believing that her son was certain to die, closed her eyes and shut out hope. But hope is a strong, spiritual force. It responds to the human craving, the cry for meaning in a senseless world. Hope is determined. Hope is insistent and persistent and arrives as a manifestation of the Divine. It has spectacular energy.... Yes, "Hope springs eternal!" And universal! Just as Rosh Hashanah comes each year offering us the gift of a new, fresh start, so too, the new year brings Hope.

So, what can I say that is hopeful about Israel?

WORLD PRIDE, even in its much-diminished state was a tremendous source of inspiration. Particularly, the LGBT Multi-faith Convocation, where Religious leaders from many faith traditions, Jews of every flavor, Christians from at least 13 different denominations, a Buddhist, a Muslim, and at least one Pagan, gathered to celebrate our queerness, learn from each other, demonstrate against bigotry and promote a message of love and tolerance at a time of intensified conflict in the region and intensified religious homophobia in Jerusalem. 19 courageous Sha'ar Zahavniks along with several hundreds of others, engaged in grassroots support for progressive political change worldwide. This felt like a significant

investment in our future. Even as our hearts mourned the sadness of the war, and the resulting smaller number of participants, still we opened our eyes to the possibilities and laid the foundation for new bridges. Arm in arm, hand in hand, we strengthened the common threads that bind us together as one human family.

Here, then, is the challenge that Judaism gives us. We're asked to open our eyes to the world, to confront its painful realities and problems. But we're commanded, at the same time, never to surrender to despair, to strive with all our ability to live a happy life and to serve God with joy. And we're given powerful Jewish tools to attain such a life. Here are a few of them.

Humor. "As a Jewish commencement speaker once said, "Today more than at any other time in history, humanity stands at the crossroads. One road leads to total despair. The other – to complete annihilation. Let us pray that we will have the wisdom to choose the right way." Woody Allen We need to laugh. Laughter helps to ease the pain. Jews have used laughter as a coping defense against despair for thousands of years. Victor Borges once said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." I think need to laugh, at least once every day.

There's a phrase in the traditional *siddur* that says "*Shabbat hi milizok* – Shabbat means we shouldn't cry out." It means that on Shabbat we're not supposed to feel sad. This is a Jewish form of mindfulness practice – better known from the Buddhist tradition. It's a form of conscious, disciplined thinking. One day a week we're asked to make a deliberate effort to stay away from thoughts and activities that distress us, and to surround ourselves

with experiences that bring us comfort and peace. Imagine that – we give ourselves a mini-vacation from worry.

Here are two more Jewish techniques for pushing back despair. When you wake up in the morning, instead of listening to the radio blaring bad news, give your mind some relief. Open your eyes, focus your thoughts, take a deep breath. Then say one line of prayer – our traditional prayer for waking up: “*Modah ani l’fanecha*...Thank You, Source of life, for returning to me, in love, the gift of this new day of life.” Just for a moment, remember that your own life is a precious miracle and the day before you will come only once; resolve to make it a good one.

And when you go to sleep at night, don’t let the dreary voice of CNN be the last words you hear before your consciousness shuts down. Close your eyes; picture the face of someone you love or a beautiful place you love to go. Be thankful for the good things you’ve been able to enjoy in your life and the good things you’ve been able to do. Take another deep breath and say the *Shema*.

Two minutes a day – that’s all it will take. But think of the difference it could have on your outlook. There are plenty of reasons to despair and yet we cannot let despair get in the way of seeing all that we do have.

Last week, Lilah and I went to a restaurant that was handing out balloons to the children. As the host offered one to Lilah, she looked at me and said with near solid conviction, “I don’t want it.” It took me a second to register this.... Kid, balloon, Oh yeah, trauma. “Well, that’s understandable,” I said. “But maybe he’ll let me have it instead?” I asked,

turning to my wounded daughter. “Sure, she said. You take it.” And so, I held the balloon, the hope, the possibility for her.... And perhaps, this is the best I can do for now; help her cultivate the hope that one day, she’ll be ready for a balloon all her own.

God, Source of Hope, coursing through us, *Shema Koleynu*, Hear Our Cry, Hear us where we are; hear us in our pain, our fear, and our vulnerability. And on these days that usher in the New Year, hear us not just for what we are, but for what we can become. *Shema Koleynu* --Hear us O God as a people railing against the inequity in the world and seeking justice. Hear us O God as a people who do not seek war but want only to live in peace.

God hear us where we are; replenish and sustain our hope, that we may yet make our lives a blessing. And help us to see the wells of healing and peace that are right before our eyes, waiting to be seen. *Amen.*