

Rosh Hashanah 5777, Day 1  
October 3, 2016

This has been in many ways a disturbing year. In Syria, France, Turkey, Iraq we have seen violence and wanton murder become all-consuming. Refugees have been turned away from many places. In the United States, there have been terrible mass shootings, stabbings, bombings and attempted bombings. We have suffered angst over police killings that seemed unjustified and guided by bias, and we have mourned for police officers attacked in misguided revenge. Feelings of instability in our country have led to a presidential campaign marked by extreme language. In Israel innocent people have been stabbed to death, and there has been the usual controversy over political policy. We have seen policy criticism of Israel morph into anti-Semitism in some places. And a Haredi Orthodoxy constantly seeks to limit religious freedom. We know there is always a lot of good in the world, but I am not sure we feel we saw very much of it in 5776.

But there is always hope. Sounds trite, doesn't it? It turns out that the notion of hope is not universal and it is not inevitable. I want to

share some teachings brought to my attention by my colleague Rabbi David Hoffman. Hope is a distinguishing characteristic of the Jewish ethic, which we bequeathed to our Christian brethren, and probably our Muslim ones as well. The Talmud says that when a person comes before God on the yom hadin, the messianic day of judgment, he or she will be asked certain questions. Did you do business honestly? Did you set aside time for Torah? Among these questions is tzipita li-yeshuah, Did you wait expectantly for salvation? In other words, did you have hope? Alan Mittleman in his book *Hope in a Democratic Age* writes of what he calls “the anxiety of hope.” In other words, when we try to have hope in uncertain circumstances we feel a constant worry that all we are doing is ignoring reality. If I have a supposedly terminal illness, what kind of hope can I have? The anxiety of hope is one reason the ancient Greeks downplayed it in favor of a fatalistic model. Hesiod writes the following about the famous story of Pandora’s box:

But the woman took off the great lid of the jar with her hands and scattered all these [ills] and her thought caused sorrow and

mischievous to men. Only Hope remained there in an unbreakable home within under the rim of the great jar, and did not fly out at the door; for ere that, the lid of the jar stopped her....

I had always heard this myth as meaning that we always still have hope. But really hope is stuck there in the jar, completely inaccessible. Unlike the world's ills it is not free to wander around to human minds.

But Judaism said we are required to have hope. According to the Ran this does not only refer to the messianic dreams of the prophets. Rather it means b'yamekha, in our days, not the theoretical but hope for redemption in the world right in front of us. There's a talmudic proverb:

אפילו חרב חדה מונחת על צוארו של אדם אל ימנע עצמו מן הרחמים

Even if a sharpened sword is against your neck, don't discount the possibility of God's mercy.

This doesn't necessarily mean you are not about to die, that God will send a superhero to save you. But it is a Jewish act of faith to believe that somehow salvation will come. It may not be in your day. It may not always be in a way you can picture. Rabbi Hoffman claims, "Hope

is not the same as optimism.” But part of the Jew’s toolkit of faith is hope. The Slonimer Rebbe, the Netivot Shalom, puts it this way:

Put another way, why is hoping for salvation part of the mitzvah of having faith? Out of the faith that the Holy One created the world and he is the Creator and Guide for all He created, we must also believe that God did not create it in vain; the Holy One did not create the world to no purpose. When we see that this world is filled with the lust to do evil, with troubles and tzuris, it simply cannot be that this is the whole end of Creation. It must be clear in our minds that the ultimate purpose will be that at the end of time will be fulfilled the verse, u-mal’ah ha-aretz deah et adonai, “the Earth shall be filled with the understanding of the Divine.” And even though we do not understand how the disturbing events of the world, the troubles and the tzuris will bring this about, we nevertheless believe that the Holy One will somehow work Creation to “the earth will be filled with the understanding of the Divine,” for this is the ultimate end of Creation.

This has a couple of practical implications. One is the language we use. We must say “no” to the politics of despair. How many people on television have we heard referring to the red state-blue state divide as “intractable,” proclaiming that our politics has “structural problems” there is no way to fix. Such discourse limits our possibilities. The Lubavitcher Rebbe z”l was very careful about the language he used. For instance he insisted on not referring to a hospital in Hebrew as a *beit holim* (“house of the sick”) but rather as a *beit refuah* (“house of healing.”) The words we use should reflect the possibility of change, the hope for a way forward.

Just this past Erev Shabbat, we buried Shimon Peres. Presidents Obama and Clinton both took pains to answer the critics who always said President Peres was naive. Whatever one may think of Peres’ peace efforts, I have to agree with Mr. Obama and Mr. Clinton. It seems almost laughable to me to declare somebody who worked so hard to make sure Israel had armaments, including nuclear capability, as

“naive.” So I would like to put forward the idea that, rather than being naive, Peres had hope. For those of us who feel we have little control over terrible events in the world, Peres’ inaugural address when he became president of Israel are worth quoting. As most of you know, the Israeli presidency is primarily a ceremonial position. This is what President Peres said: ,

.. אני יודע שנשיא אינו מושל, אינו שופט, אינו מחוקק, אבל מותר לו לחלום להציב ערכים לנהוג ביושר ובחמלה, בעוז ובחסד. אין איסור על הנשיא לעשות מעשים טובים. הוא רשאי, ואף חייב, לשרת את עמו, כלומר את בני עמו. לטפח אהבה לעם, למדינה, לבריות. לקרב רחוקים, לצפות למרחק, לסייע לחלשים, לנחם אבלים, לקרב לבבות, להרבות שוויון, לגשר על פערים, לתמוך ביצירה רוחנית ומדעית

I know that a president does not rule, is not a jurist, does not legislate, but he is permitted to dream, to put forward values, to act rightly and with compassion, strength, and kindness. There is no prohibition on the president to do good works. He is allowed, and even obligated, to serve his nation... to convey love for the nation, the state, his fellow human beings; to bring near those who are far,

to gaze into the future, to assist the weak, comfort the bereaved, capture hearts, foster equality, bridge [society's] gaps, to support spiritual and scientific endeavor.

We, who do not rule the world, who have little control over legislation on a grand scale, we too are permitted to do the little, sometimes unnoticed acts that represent our commitment to hope.

The book of Isaiah declares:

קול צפיקד נשאו קול יחדו ירגנו כי עין בעין יראו בשוב יהוה ציון:

Hark!

Your watchmen raise their voices,  
As one they shout for joy;  
For every eye shall behold  
The LORD's return to Zion.<sup>1</sup>

In Hebrew, “watchmen” comes from the same root as “awaiting” in the phrase “tzipita lyeshuah,” “did you eagerly await salvation?” The image is that of a guard in a watchtower, who can see more and further than the average person. Rabbi Akiva says that these watchmen are the neviim, the prophets of Israel, who warn Israel when it is in danger but

---

<sup>1</sup> Jewish Publication Society. (1985). *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Is 52:8). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

nevertheless are quick to kindle hope and announce salvation when it is near. We must all be like those watchmen. Attempting to see salvation even when it is afar off, and even when the daily events of the world don't seem to herald it. Let us maintain hope as a central spiritual practice. Let us keep alive the hopeful nature of Shimon Peres, z"l. May we watch the words we use and the deeds we perform so as to reflect this practice and this value. On this Yom Hadin, day of judgement, in a world of trouble and travail, I hope all of us will still respond with a resounding yes to the question, tzipita liyeshuah, "Did you hope for salvation?"