

Dear Temple Emanu-El members and friends,

I would like to share my Erev Rosh HaShanah sermon with you: Hope in Hard Times....

Tonight, I want to talk about despair and hope, but mostly hope. A lot of the people I talk to these days feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the world's problems: climate change, political polarization, rising authoritarianism as well as the ever-present issues of poverty, racism, misogyny, violence, and so on. Too often I hear a sense of powerlessness: there's nothing I can do, one person doesn't make any difference, I just stop reading the news.

Despair has, of course, always been part of human experience. Our earliest Jewish writings describe deep feelings of discouragement. In the biblical Book of Numbers, Moses is portrayed as being so overwhelmed by his responsibilities that he feels suicidal. He asks God,

Why have you treated one who serves you so badly? Why
have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden
of all this people on me? I am not able to carry all this people
alone, for they are too heavy for me....If this is the way you
are going to treat me, if you care about me, put me to death
at once and do not let me see my misery. (Numbers 11:11, 14-15)

The Book of Psalms also has many examples of despair. Psalm 13 begins:

How long, O Adonai? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

And if we think the list of problems we face today is overwhelming, we have only to look at Jewish history from the time of the Bible onwards for a devastating list of disaster: conquest, destruction, exile, persecution, ghettos, pogroms, concentration camps. How is it possible that Jews did not give in to despair, that we continued to live as Jews and to hope?

One answer is an optimistic view of human nature. Genesis teaches us that we are created in the image of God and the daily morning service tells us that "the soul You have given me is pure"—we are essentially good. Writer Rebecca Solnit points out that American disaster relief planning is based on the idea that people in extreme situations will become violent and need to be controlled but that, in the vast majority of cases, the truth is quite the opposite. Disaster survivors from New York during 9/11, for example, recounted stories of people doing all they could to help others, even to their own detriment.¹ Debbie Friedman always prefaced a request with, "I wonder if you can help me." When I asked her why, she said, "People like to help," a phrase that often comes to mind because she was right. Helping allows us to experience our significance to others.

Judaism is a profoundly optimistic tradition and nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in the High Holiday practice of teshuvah, usually translated as "repentance," but really meaning

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Haymarket Books, 2016.

“turning” or “returning.” Teshuvah is based on an understanding that human beings are imperfect and will always make mistakes but those mistakes do not have to determine the rest of our lives. Acknowledging and acting to repair the harm we have done to others or ourselves allows us to return to our intended path. We need not be the victims of fate but have the power to make conscious change.

This Jewish optimism extends far beyond the individual into the very nature of creation. Two leaders of the early American Reform movement, Rabbis Emil Hirsch and Joseph Jacobs, wrote:

For all its realism, Judaism never advised passive resignation, or the abandonment of and withdrawal from the world. It rejects the theory that the root of life is evil, or that [humanity] and life and the world are corrupt as a consequence of original sin. Its optimism is apparent in its faith in the slow but certain uplifting of [hu]mankind, in the ultimate triumph of justice over injustice, and in the certain coming of a Messianic age.²

A second Jewish approach to hope is present in the phrase “na’aseh venishmah” - “we will do and we will listen.” This was the Israelites’ response after receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. The rabbis looked at this passage and wondered why the words were in this order: wouldn’t it make more sense to say “we will listen and then we will do?” Their answer was one that has been fundamental to Jewish history: action takes precedence over belief — whether or not you want to do what is right, it is essential to do it nonetheless. Hopefully, in the process you will come to understand its value. The example I like to give is that of tzedakah, the 3-20% of our income that Jewish tradition tells us we must use for the alleviation of poverty. The person receiving the money doesn’t really care whether you wanted to give it or not but it’s better for you if you do. To continue with the example, over time the habit of giving becomes part of who you are — act generously for long enough and you will actually become a generous person.

The significance of taking action is fundamental to what Judaism is all about. Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, writes:

...Judaism is a faith for those who seek to change the world...
Most religions are about accepting the world the way it is.
Judaism is a protest against the world that is in the name of
the world that ought to be. To be a Jew is to seek to make a
difference, to change lives for the better, to heal some of the
scars of our fractured world.³

In a more universal (but, I would argue, very Jewish) vein, Rabbi Lionel Blue, sympathizes with the desire to pull the covers back up over our heads after hearing the morning news but says,

Religion means facing facts not fleeing from them. Get up quickly,

² Moshe Pitchon, “For a Jew it is a Sin to Despair,”

<http://www.jewishpress.com/judaism/parsha/for-a-jew-it-is-a-sin-to-despair/2015/12/22/>

³ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “From Despair to Hope,” <http://rabbisacks.org/test-character-behaalotecha-5776/>

have your cup of tea, and work out what you can do. Can you comfort someone...or give something to a disaster fund? Monday morning can be dreadful - but that's why you're here. You might look and feel a mess but you're God's representative — God's hands on earth, working to complete...creation. It's what we were created for. So let's get up, and get on with it.⁴

Jews have always found hope in community. Judaism emphasizes our need for others. In the section of the Book of Numbers I mentioned earlier, the solution God provided to Moses when he felt overwhelmed with his duties was to instruct him in the art of delegation, sharing his responsibilities with seventy elders. Another example comes from a story in the Babylonian Talmud [Berachot 5b]. The story relates that a great rabbi, Yochanan, was sick and another rabbi, Chanina, went to visit him. When he arrived Rabbi Yochanan asked Rabbi Chanina to give him his hand. Rabbi Chanina did so and Rabbi Yochanan was cured of his illness. The story ends with the talmudic sages asking, "Why couldn't Rabbi Yochanan heal himself?" The answer was, "Prisoners cannot free themselves from jail" — in other words, even the greatest of us needs the help of others.

Traditionally, a minyan—ten men, representing ten households—was considered the minimum needed to have a community. Taking that model, each of us should be intimately connected with, at the very least, nineteen other adults and numerous children who live within walking distance of each other. Few of us today are able to replicate this experience but synagogues can, nevertheless, be significant places of connection where we find inspiration and support for living with a sense of meaning and purpose. Spiritual practice provides some of the joy we need for the journey in song, dance, prayer, study, work for justice, and celebration with others.

Aligned with a sense of hope is a deep appreciation of the miraculous nature of life. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel often discussed "radical amazement," which he said

is the chief characteristic of the religious [person's] attitude toward history and nature. ...[knowing] that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes...aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate [a] sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. [...]

[Hu]mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.⁵

⁴ Lionel Blue and Jonathan Magonet, *How to Get Up When Life Gets You Down*, Fount/HarperCollins, 1992.

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997

Having a sense of perspective is another foundation of hope. An early Chassidic leader, Rabbi Simcha Bunem taught that everyone should have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: "For my sake was the world created. "But when feeling high and mighty, arrogant or overly proud, one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: "I am but dust and ashes."

It's easy to understand the use of the message of our individual significance carried in the right pocket. But the other pocket contains a hopeful idea as well. Sometimes, acknowledging that we are dust and ashes, limited, mortal human beings, can help us accept that we can't—and don't have to—do it all ourselves. This is the importance of Rabbi Tarfon's teaching in the Talmud: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it." Or, in more contemporary language, "Just because you can't finish the job, isn't an excuse for not doing something about it." From a Jewish perspective, if something's worth doing, it's worth doing whether we succeed or not. We take up tasks of repair left from preceding generations knowing there will be more that we will pass on in turn. This is not a problem, it is the nature of our world with its own power and beauty, like that of a patchwork quilt whose once discarded pieces take on a new life of use and pleasure.

Throughout Rosh Hashanah we recite, "hayyom harat olam," "today the world is born anew" — what could be a greater affirmation of hope? How is it born anew? That is up to us. It is born anew through the choices we make and the actions we take. From a Jewish perspective, to live a life of meaning is to live a life of awareness of the moral dimension of our daily lives. We are not God with the power to create and remake a whole cosmos. We are humans, made in the divine image, with the power to create and remake our lives and our societies. These Days of Awe are meant to remind us of that power and encourage us to use it thoughtfully and responsibly. In the words of poet Adrienne Rich:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.⁶

The Talmud teaches that if all Jews observed just one Shabbat the Messiah would come. In other words, the healing of the world comes through the way we live our lives—if everyone lives a moral life, the world will be a moral place. This is the hopeful and joyful response we make to the amazing gift of life. We will not do it perfectly, we cannot do it alone but, as we will hear from Deuteronomy on Yom Kippur, it is in our mouths and in our hearts for us to do — it is in our nature, it was what we were created for.

I want to finish tonight with a song we have been singing throughout this past month of Elul. It was written by Rabbi Menachem Creditor for his daughter, who was born in the wake of the

⁶ Adrienne Rich, "Natural Resources," *The Dream of a Common Language*, 1978

Twin Towers falling on Sept. 11th. Thinking of the rebuilding that would need to happen, he recalled a line from Psalm 89: olam chesed yibaneh, the world will be built with chesed, compassionate love. It is we who build and rebuild the world and if we do it with love, with care and awareness, living out our values, it will be the world for which we hope.

Here is a link to listen to Rabbi Creditor singing his song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHp-jcPIKIY>

L'Shanah Tovah,

Rabbi Drorah Setel

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Haymarket Books, 2016.

² Moshe Pitchon, "For a Jew it is a Sin to Despair,"

<http://www.jewishpress.com/judaism/parsha/for-a-jew-it-is-a-sin-to-despair/2015/12/22/>

³ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "From Despair to Hope," <http://rabbisacks.org/test-character-behaalotecha-5776/>

⁴ Lionel Blue and Jonathan Magonet, *How to Get Up When Life Gets You Down*, Fount/HarperCollins, 1992.

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997

⁶ Adrienne Rich, "Natural Resources," *The Dream of a Common Language*, 1978