

The New Yorker magazine, which I read avidly each week has a column that I'm sure many people here are familiar with. It's their humor column, called the Shouts & Murmurs. Like many humor columns, the Shouts & Murmurs offers poignant and often biting commentary on the world that swirls around it.

Some Shouts & Murmurs headlines from this summer, for example, include pressing pieces like: "Curating Hip yet Elegant Art for Starbucks Cafes," "Inspirational Quote Cushions for Different Life Stages" and "Alternative Forms of Entertainment for when trapped on your Meditation Retreat."

In January of 2017, as questions about journalistic ethics and responsibility grew in stature and attention, Shouts & Murmurs published a piece called "Additions to the Journalistic Five W's." A play on the traditional notion that any issue is most thoroughly probed with a reasonable "who, where, what, when, why" accounting, this article added what it deemed to be more appropriate questions for the modern era:

- The two As, “are you kidding me?” and “am I dreaming?”
- The one S, “seriously?!” which was followed with the addendum:
“journalists should always look the person they’re interviewing in the eye and ask, ‘You’re seriously saying that to me with a straight face?’”
- And the one I, “Is there no respite from the madness?,” with its accompanying explanation: “This is a pretty basic question, which is unfortunately relevant these days whether you’re reporting on global affairs, business, sports, or even just writing restaurant reviews.”

Like most Shouts & Murmurs pieces, this article uncovers, or plays within the bounds of, deeper and sometimes harder truths. Here, a reader might be encouraged to reflect on what could feel like the unraveling of norms, or on a sense of unfamiliarity or uncertainty. Or connected, one could infer critique at how we approach a question, how we embark on a quest for truth and understanding.

These issues, these complexities, are ones that, I am sure, we are all encountering on any and many levels. In our lives personal or public, we all experience these moments of disorientation, where it feels like the ground under us is tenuous or trembling, when our tools from the past can't help us in the present. When things happen without explanations that feel sensible or whole, when what we witness or experience doesn't match up with what we believe or dream. When we look out on a world, or on a life, that - at least in this moment - makes no sense.

We can all, I imagine, sitting here right now call to mind such a moment. Maybe a phase from our past. Maybe a challenge of our present - personal, communal, societal. A time when our world felt off-kilter, unrecognizable. In putting ourselves into the memory or space of those experiences, those places of crushing confusion, we likely find ourselves pulled to two disparate and natural responses. Two extremities that this sort of disorientation can easily push us toward: baseless faith, or utter despair. In our moments or memories of senselessness, we find ourselves either desperately trying to make sense, or giving up on sense as a guiding force at all. Too much faith, or too much despair.

What I want to offer us tonight - what I think our tradition offers us - is a third way out. A middle ground that is neither perfect faith nor perfect despair. A middle ground for a path out of this confusion that our tradition calls hope.

And as our way in to what this hope is and how it can show up in our lives, I want to - humbly - defy the New Yorker's advice, and look together at a who, where, what, when and why of hope.

The **who** we have already begun. Because the who - the answer to the question **who are those who hope** - is something we intuit. Each of us, we want to answer. Each of us has the potential to manifest hope.

And indeed, our tradition supports this notion. Some throughout the ages have even gone so far as to say that the capacity to hope is THE defining characteristic of what it means to be a Jew or a person of abiding faith in the world.

But our sacred canon gives nuance to, or complicates, this idea. And in fact, our Tanakh's most accurate - and indeed, most surprising and even most radical - answer to the question of "who are those who hope?" is actually "those who are in the deepest pits." "Those who are closest to pain." "Those who have the most to lose, the most reason to give up and despair." *Those* are the ones who can most honestly, and most courageously, manifest hope.

The word "tikvah," the most common and analogous Hebrew word for hope, occurs 32 times in Tanakh. Of those 32, 12 are in the book of Job, 4 in Psalms. Tikvah occurs twice in Jeremiah and twice in Ezekiel, once each in Hosea, Zechariah, and Lamentations.

Job. Psalms. Jeremiah. Lamentations. These are not exactly Tanakh's most lighthearted or uplifting segments. No, these are the places in our canon that most deeply express communal or individual pain - times in which the temptation to give up on making sense, and to either proclaim a perfect but irrational faith, or to recede into a rational but imperfect despair - times when that temptation is great.

And so yes, all Jews, all people, are called on to manifest hope. But who are the ones who need that reminder, who depend on tikvah, the most? It's those very people - those very parts of ourselves or our narratives - who are in the darkest holes. *Those for whom hope is the hardest, it turns out, are the very ones who are tasked to manifest it most.* The more any of us feels discouragement or despair, the more - the harder - we are called on to access hope.

So that's the who. What about the **where - from where does hope emerge?**

Here, the answer is similar, and similarly unequivocal: hope emerges from places of deep uncertainty.

This simple yet profound truth is captured beautifully in Psalm 27 - the Psalm for this season - the one we began reciting on Rosh Hodesh Elul, the beginning of this period of repentance, that carries us through the yamin noraim, the high holy days.

It's the psalm that ends with the showstopping plea, the inspiration for our theme this year,

קִוֵּה, אֱלֹהֵי-יְהוָה: חֲזַק, וַיֵּאֱמַץ לְבָבְךָ; וְקִוֵּה, אֱלֹהֵי-יְהוָה

Hope in God, be strong and courageous of heart, hope in God.

And while *this* line seems like a resounding declaration of faith, the rest of the psalm does not necessarily read as such.

Just a few verses earlier, the psalmist pleads, *begs*, “do not hide from me, do not reject me, do not abandon me, do not forsake me, my God.”

The two halves of this psalm - the half of self-assurance, of confidence in God's presence, in optimism in the future; and the half of doubt and questioning and despair - read as so radically different that it feels as though they could not possibly coexist. But that is precisely the point.

Rabbi Benjamin Segal, a renowned modern commentator on the book of psalms, writes that this psalm leaves us with the understanding that “there are two extremes in life: total assurance or belief and a deep, almost incurable despondency. Out of these, the reader is to create one life.” Out of this, from this combination of places, emerges *one* experience of meaning and purpose. How so? Kaveh el Adonai - through hope.

Not a hope of data or of evidence. Not a hope of irrefutable faith. No - here, Rabbi Segal explains, hope is when “the psalmist keeps seeking God, even as the empty echoes of his search accentuate his failure.” Hope is continuing to call out, even when you’re not sure - even when you’re rattled with uncertainty and doubt - that there’s even anyone listening at all.

From where does hope emerge? From that terrifying yet fruitful place of uncertainty. From that place where it feels farthest away - the place that feels the most hopeless.

Who. Where. What. **What**, then, does this hope look like? This hope that lives in us when we struggle and hurt, that is birthed in our places of skepticism, uncertainty or doubt

What does *that* hope look like?, we ask? It looks like *action*.

This is a notion, this is an aspect of hope, that is, again, embedded into the word itself. In those very books of the Tanakh, those uncertain moments of pain, where hope lived and thrived most crucially, the linguistic root for the word “hope” appears most often not as a noun, but as a *verb*. “In the book of Psalms, [for example,] the psalmists *hope* in God - the verb! - in the midst of their own suffering, as opposed to debating the idea of having hope - the noun.”

In those moments of pits, of hardship, of uncertainty - those people and those places, that who and that where, from which hope emerges and is manifest - *hope is not just a state of being. It is not just an experience of the mind, or of the emotion. Hope is what spurs us to action.* It is what

causes us *not* just to wait for the life, or the experience, or the world that we imagine - but to *actively work to bring it about*.

In a reinterpretation of that slogan from Psalm 27 -

קִיָּה, אֱלֹהֵינוּ: חֲזַק, וַיֵּאמֶץ לְבָבְךָ; וְקִיָּה, אֱלֹהֵינוּ

Hope in God, be strong and courageous of heart, hope in God -

Professor Robert Pollack - a New York City biologist who brings his study of science to the experience of living Torah - writes, “as Jews, we are to hope in Adonai - and then we are to do everything we can to strengthen ourselves as if we were wholly left to our own fates. And then we are to continue to hope in Adonai despite having acted as if we were wholly on our own.”

What does hope look like? It doesn't look like deluding ourselves into thinking that progress happens by magic, or on its own. And it doesn't look like giving up. It looks like doing, *actively doing*, whatever we can to bring about the world we want to inhabit. It looks like channeling our hurt and our uncertainty and our pull toward despair into concrete steps, into moments

of transformation. Because as Jews, *our action doesn't mean we've lost hope in God - it means we've found it. It means we're living it.*

Who. Where. What. **When?** When do we manifest this hope?

We might think that the answer to *this* question is a grandiose one. When do we embody this religious imperative to stave off despair and bring about a better world? Only on the biggest, the holiest of days, we might answer! Our day of Judgement! Our moment of deliverance!

Not so, our tradition corrects. Hope - this sort of hope, born from uncertainty, hope that lives in action - this sort of hope we are called on to embody not just at the biggest moments of our calendar or our lives, but each and every day. In moments large *and* small.

The ancient rabbis drive home this message through a subtle yet brilliant tweak. They find the *only* instance of the word hope in the Torah itself, those uniquely holy first five books of Moses, at the very end of the book of

Genesis. Nearing death, in the midst of offering his final brachot, his final words of wisdom and blessing, to his offspring, Yaakov cries out:

“לִישׁוּעָתְךָ קִנִּיתִי יְהוָה:” “I hope in your salvation, your deliverance, Adonai!”

The rabbis then, clearly captured by this raw, emotional sentiment, incorporate this language into our daily liturgy, into the heart of the weekday Amidah. But with one small change. Instead of merely proclaiming “lishuatcha kivinu, Adonai” - we hope for, we actively await, your salvation, Adonai, we now recite - three times daily! - “ki lishuatcha kivinu KOL HAYOM.” For your salvation we expect, we hope, we pray - kol hayom. All day. Every day. Each of us, all of us, hoping and *acting* together. At any and every moment.

This is a lofty demand. This is a magnificent call. This is the reminder that we all face uncertainty, we all experience disorientation, we are all lured into moments of delusion or despair. We all have - we all just a few moments ago called to mind - moments when the world turns too fast or too hard, and where our souls are left empty with no path or direction home.

Our response, though, cannot be to sit back, as tempting as that is. Cannot be to despair, or be passive, as all consuming as that desire may be. Our response cannot even be to hope in theory, to hope in the mind, but then to observe, to stand by, to wait, to delay. But instead, our way forward must be to make each and every action, each and every day, a response to that condition. To make *each moment* a holy step, no matter how small, toward that salvation, that redemption, that we so desperately desire. Our way forward must be to realize that the demand to hope despite all odds is what moves us to action - what helps us take that first small step - when we feel so stuck in, so immobilized by, disorientation, doubt and despair.

Who is called on to hope? Those of us who are closest to life's challenges and travails - all of us, then, when we face our inevitable hardships.

From **where** does hope come? From those very places of uncertainty and doubt.

What does hope look like? Like an action, like a deed - any deed!, that moves us even one small step closer to the world we want to inhabit.

When does that hope, that movement, happen? All the time. Every day.

Today.

Why? WHY engage in this project at all? Why not succumb to the despair, why not comfort ourselves with easier faith? It sounds simpler. So why push ourselves to fight, to change, to act?

The why can be answered with a story. With many stories, actually, I'm sure. Many stories from the sacred texts of our lives in which we - each of us - overcame despair and were moved to action.

Here's one such story. Here's my family's story.

My grandfather is a Holocaust survivor. He was born in Kishenev, Romania - a town whose Jewish population was 60,000 in 1940; 18 months later, that number was 86. He is one of the few who we call lucky because we have no other word, but lucky feels like a crass term for the horrors he experienced.

In his time in ghettos and camps, my grandfather lived those places of hardships that our texts narrate. He was drawn into the deepest pits of the human experience, he watched and fled from and bore witness to the darkest depravity imaginable.

Subsisting from miracle to miracle, he found himself after the war washed up on the strange shores of Tel Aviv. With his community destroyed, his education cut short, and his world flipped upside down - I can only imagine the temptation to despair. To succumb. How could one possibly move out of the depths of this place? Regain any faith in the world?

The healing took a lifetime - but it started one step at a time. Find and reconnect with surviving family. Locate a place to study. And further down the road - reignite a passion for learning. Reopen the heart to love. One act at a time. One step in front of the other. One day - each day - building upon the next, hayom after hayom after hayom, day after day to make up a lifetime. To rebuild a life.

My grandfather is now 91 years old - a retired professor with a long career and a flourishing family. To me and countless others, he is a beloved confidante, teacher and friend. In fact, the two of us have a tradition where we talk on the phone every Sunday - in the 10 years since I left LA, we haven't missed a week.

And my grandfather's story - his past, with its twists and its turns - it's a story of a lot of things. It's a story of chance. It's a story of the kindness of strangers. It's a story of gratitude.

But tonight, for me, it's mostly a story of hope. A story of how even on the heels of unimaginable hardship and uncertainty, how we still have the capacity to emerge and build forward. And while my hardships have blessedly never rivaled his, his resilience lives in me - drives me to act, to progress, to move myself and my world onward, upward, forward. His hope - his refusal to let his world be stuck, his commitment to act and give and love his way out - lifts me out of my own moments of uncertainty, my own experiences of doubt, my own times of feeling stuck.

We all know these stories. We all have these moments. We can all live this hope. This hope that refuses despair. This hope that takes despondency and channels it into action. Action that can take any number of different forms, action that can be big or be very very small, but that matters nonetheless - that has impact and consequences that are of existential significance.

So why hope? Because the stakes are too high not to.

- Because each and every day is too sacred, too holy, to let ourselves stay stuck when the world pushes us down.
- Because our lives and legacies are too precious to give in to despair and confusion.
- Because the future of the world we will one day leave behind to those we love - the future of the world my grandfather is leaving behind for me - is too crucial - is too dependent on us and our actions - to not work each and every day, *starting with today*, to make it better.

Why hope? Because that's how we get to the love that's waiting on the other side.