

Judaism: The inextinguishable Voice of Hope
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My son Zachary was born April of 2001, my daughter Ariel in February of 2004 & Jordan was born in October of 2006 – this means, all 3 of them are too young to ever remember 9/11. What they know about that tragic day, comes only from discussions we have at home or through school commemorations and what they may see on the news each year on its anniversary. They are too young to have to remember the sickening feelings we all had that day, and in the days, that followed. They are too young to know anything other than my taking off my shoes at airport security and not being able to bring their own drinks on a flight. And they are too young to possibly understand the sense of vulnerability and fear that permeated our nation post- September 11th.

And for that I am grateful.

But my children are also too young to have witnessed the extraordinary resilience of a people, who felt the ground drop out from beneath them and who had to mine impossibly deep for the hope needed to carry on and the courage to get back up *as* that ground was being rebuilt. That kind of courage remains in a category of its own, radically different from the kind of courage it takes to go ziplining if you're afraid of heights or to stand in front of a group of people if you have a fear of public speaking. And each of those is distinctly different from the kind of courage that is required to do the soul-work required of us at all times, but especially during these High Holy Days.

Courage is the strength to do something in the face of uncertainty, fear or danger, while hope is defined, "as wanting something to happen or be true." The words "hope" and "courage" are often expressed easily and organically in the same sentence, yet each has unique importance on its own. Were I to ask you right now to ascribe the word "active" or "passive" to the words hope and courage, I suspect many would say that hope is passive and courage is active. But I would propose that hope is very much active and very much central to the year ahead and these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe.

Hope, *tikvah*, has propelled our people forward in the most horrific and frightening of times; through slavery, exile, the loss of our homeland, oppression, destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (twice), the inquisition, pogroms, blood-libels, the Holocaust, Race riots, bomb threats, desecration of Jewish cemeteries and most recently and horrifyingly, torch-bearing white supremacists chanting, "Jews will not replace us." Throughout it all, some might say in spite of it all, or specifically, **because** of it all, we have not only persevered, but we have **preserved** our core of hope, our core belief that something better, stronger and more just exists.

We have been called a people of "inextinguishable hope" by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who has written that "Judaism is the voice of hope in history." **Judaism is the voice of hope in history.** He doesn't write this in the past-tense, referring only to our Biblical ancestors or our relatives who lived and endured in the ghetto, he writes this about us, about you and me. So, how do we understand our role as part of this chorus of voices of hope?

As individual Jews, as members of the broader Jewish community and in relationship with G-d.

In his book The Road to Character David Brooks talks about a friend, "... who spends a few moments in bed at night reviewing the mistakes of his day. His central sin, from which many of his other sins branch out, is a certain hardness of heart. He's a busy guy with many people making demands on his time. Sometimes he is not fully present for people who are asking his advice or revealing some vulnerability. Sometimes he is more interested in making good impressions than listening to other people in depth. Maybe he spent more time at a meeting thinking about how he might seem impressive than about what others were actually saying. Maybe he flattered people too unctuously. Each night he catalogues his errors. He tallies his recurring core sins and the other mistakes that might have branched off from them. Then he develops strategies for how he might do better tomorrow. Tomorrow he'll try to look differently at people, pause more before people. He'll put care above prestige, the higher thing above the lower thing. We all have a moral responsibility to be more moral every day, and he will struggle to inch ahead each day in this most important sphere. (p. 11)

He is hopeful that his relationships can be better, stronger and more just. He believes that this worthwhile and that people who live this way believe that character is not innate or automatic --- but that it must be built with effort and artistry. I imagine that David Brooks had our High Holy Day concept of *Heshbon ha nefesh*, of taking careful stock of our relationships in mind when he wrote this passage about his friend and noted that, "you can't be the good person you want to be unless you wage this campaign." The relationships *ben adam l'havero*, in this instance between his friend and another warrant his friend's full attention and the fullness of his heart. Each and every night. He deems this essential as a person who has the capacity to change and who knowingly or not, aspires to be a voice of hope.

Brooks goes on to say that, "waging this campaign to be the good person we want, is insufficient if we don't at the same time strive with the same, if not more intensity, to also figure out: "What this environment, this country, this world needs in order to be made whole?" Asking, "What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed? (p.22) It is here we find the second way we can be a part of this chorus of hope: As members of our community.

In their book entitled Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy, authors Joanna Macy & Dr. Chris Johnston note that, "Active hope is about becoming active participants in what we hope for. Active hope is a practice. Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we *do* rather than *have*. It is waking up to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act." Active communal hope acknowledges that we have never been prepared to accept the world fractured as it is, believing that things can be made better. Active hope is given shape and structure when we as a community, bring gift cards to the ticket desk in the front lobby during the High Holy Days to assist those in Houston who are trying to rebuild after Hurricane Harvey. It is when we bring bags of non-perishable food to donate to Foodlink for those in need here in Rochester, on Kol Nidre. It is in the time, energy and love shared by the extraordinary cadre of men and women who are literacy volunteers at School # 45.

Active hope comes in the form of the rallies and vigils we attend in support and in protest. And, in these polarized times, active hope is having difficult conversations, conversations where our core values feel and may in fact be at risk, perhaps with difficult people and perhaps with people whom we like, love and respect but whose opinions we do not share. *Al tifrosh min ha tzibur*. We do not separate ourselves from the community. (Pirkei Avot 2:5) Active hope is walking towards, not away these conversations.

This has been a year like no other. We have witnessed unprecedented, tension, strife, hostility, violence and natural disasters that as we sit here tonight continue to ravage still, our friends to the south. I understand the inclination of some to pull the covers up over their heads and to say, “wake me up when it’s over” or those who observe a “news-fast.” I have at times considered the same. But hope, must win out. Whether it is the memory of even the faintest flicker of it remaining, or the fire in our belly that propels us out of bed each day, we must endeavor not to separate ourselves from the community.

Maurice Lamm says, “that hope gives us the energy and strength to fight back when adversity strikes. And adversity, as we have seen all too clearly this past year can do many things, it can:

- open our eyes
- make us grow in ways we never knew
- give us the precious gift of compassion
- require us to work together
- It can teach us a universal truth: Life is not fair
- And I would add it can frighten us,

But adversity must also compel us not to separate ourselves from the community. Lamm also says, that adversity, if we are thoughtful, can lead us to G-d. ([The Power of Hope](#))

Which brings us to our third and final expression of being a voice of hope. When we choose to spend this night gathered in prayer, and more hours in the days to come doing the same, we are expressing our yearning for things to be better. We are expressing our yearning to G-d. Expressing our yearning for things to be better, more honest and purposeful between us and G-d. We are saying that we hope we will either continue, or find our footing on the right path, headed in the right direction, in this year ahead.

We are saying to G-d, out loud, in public that we have erred intentionally or unintentionally, and are expressing our fervent hope when we say:

Ve-al kulam Eloha selichot, selach lanu, mechal lanu, kaper lanu.

For all our wrongs, Source of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, and receive our atonement.

Forgive us.

When we take comfort from the words of the 23rd Psalm, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil: for You are with me". We express our hope that G-d is with us in our most difficult and frightening hours.

Be with us.

And when we read, hear and study about how many times in our Torah G-d reaffirms to us that the world was created out love and forgiveness, so we can better love and forgive each other, we are reassured that G-d wants us to succeed. And we are reminded of the power, beauty and resonance of that 1st. quintessential Voice of hope.

Let us be individual voices of hope. Let us be communal voice of hope. Let us be in concert with G-d as voices of hope. And let our Jewish voice, be a voice of inextinguishable hope. And lest we be confused, Rabbi Sacks reminds us that, "Hope, is not the same as optimism, or the naive belief that things will get better. Given Jewish history, he points out, optimism is something Jews would be foolish to espouse. It is passive and accepting, whereas "hope requires us to work together to make things better." Let us commit in this year to working together to make things better. Hourly, daily, individually, communally and in our relationship with G-d.

No, my children will never understand the horror that followed in the days after September 11th and for that I remain thankful. But my children are old enough to have seen this past year punctuated by far too much fear, violence, destruction, uncertainty and strife. My hopes for them are as they are for all of us: In the New Year ahead, let us continue to strive to live and be unafraid to hope. May we work tirelessly against the forces that threaten us, our rights and the rights of others. Let us be inspired once last time by the powerful words of Rabbi Sacks who says that, "To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Judaism is a sustained struggle against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet."

And let us say, amen.