Imagining a Different World
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Once a month on Shabbat after Kiddush, Reb Moshe and I meet with the Bnei Mitzvah students and their families, here at TBZ. I am always fascinated by the conversations we have with 6th and 7th graders on issues of Jewish identity and values. Their curiosity and fresh ways of thinking always produce very interesting points of views, often helping me, or forcing me to look at things in a totally new way. A few months ago, I participated in such a session focused on the question - “What is the Messiah? And why is it mentioned so much in our liturgy”? I began the conversation with the students by asking them to imagine a perfect world. We had a fascinating exchange as the students tried to imagine what that would look like. Each student offered another element of this fantasy world, no wars, no hunger, no global warming, on and on. At some point, one of the students said, “the problem is that if all these things we are saying would happen, life would be boring.” This comment led to a whole discussion about how boring the world would be without hatred, wars, hunger, violence and all the other calamities. Someone even asked, “What would be in the newspaper?” Most of the students agreed that this was a real problem, and though I did my best to share the idea that we could actually try to imagine a world without all these tragedies, it was very difficult for these teenagers to do so.

This difficulty is not unique to children and teenagers. We are all susceptible to identifying what is, with what could be. It takes a moment of pure grace to break through the limitations of a reality we are used to, and even
imagine a radically different possibility. I would like to share one such moment from my own life. Last Wednesday was September 11, twelve years since the horrible tragedy that took so many lives and brought so much pain to this Country. For me however, September 11 has been a day of profound sadness since my childhood. Forty years ago, on September 11, Augusto Pinochet took power in Chile through a coup d’état, ruling the country cruelly for sixteen years. Those sixteen years were the formative years of my life. I have memories of despair and of pessimism. Chile was a very gray place during those years. As children we would often protest against the Regime of Pinochet in the backyard of our house in Santiago by banging on kitchen pots. I remembered that noise-making as a mixed experience. As a child, just making noise was fun, and although I probably did not understand much of what was going on, deep in my heart I knew that there was something wrong with the reality of the country, and that what we were doing was dangerous. One of the most powerful memories I have from my high school years is that we were not allowed to be outside on the street after a certain hour at night, usually not past eleven thirty. Those were actually the late nights; sometimes the “toque de queda” the curfew was much earlier. I don’t know if I really understood how dangerous it was out there, but I knew my parents were scared, and that people were disappearing off the streets and being killed. On October 5th, 1988 there was a YES or NO referendum vote on the continuation of the dictatorship of Pinochet. The "NO" vote won - ending 16 years of dictatorship in Chile. I was only 14 years old that October 5th, yet I remember that day vividly. It was my first experience of democracy. It was a day of celebration, a day of hope, a day of possibilities, a day to be out on the streets and for the first time not to be afraid. It was a day on which it felt like everything was possible.
David Grossman, a well-known Israeli author and peace activist wrote a powerful essay called “Contemplations on Peace” (“Writing in the Dark”, published in 2008). In it, he argues that we lack the capacity to truly believe that peace is an option. Though he is writing about the situation in Israel, I think his words are relevant more globally. He writes about how in contemporary discourse peace is always connected to a hope or a wish, but rarely presented as a possible reality or a concrete idea. Grossman says that although peace is a primary element in Jewish prayer and biblical prophecy is usually an abstract idea, presented as something that will happen only in the future, in a very far future in the end of the days. Grossman challenges the reader to contemplate a shift to truly believing that a world without war, enemies and fears is truly possible. “It will be a huge challenge- he writes – to learn to live a life that is not defined by hostility, anxiety, and violence. To foresee a continuum of existence and a constant future. To educate children based on views and beliefs that are not shaped inevitably by the fear of death” (Page 91). Grossman ends his essay by sharing a wish that is uttered at the end of his earlier book See Under Love. There he writes: “A group of persecuted Jews in the Warsaw ghetto finds an abandoned baby boy and decides to raise him. The elderly Jews, broken and tortured, stand around the child and dream about what they would like his life to be, and into what sort of world they would like him to grow up. Behind them, the real world is going up in smoke, with blood and fire everywhere, and they say a prayer together. This is their prayer: “All of us prayed for one thing: that he might end his life knowing nothing of war…. We asked so little: for a man to live in this world from birth to death and know nothing of war” (Page 119).
Is it possible for us to believe that we could live in a better world? That our children could? Is it too hard to think about it as a reality? Or must that wish always stay in the realm of abstract?

Perhaps by being able to recognize goodness in the world around us we can envision a better world. Hoping for a better world does not mean just seeing the flaws in this world. It can also mean seeing and appreciating the seeds of goodness, so that we understand more deeply what we are striving for!

This summer I had a moment of recognizing goodness, a moment of Tikkun, a moment of healing and hope. It was a short and sweet moment. On a Friday night in Jerusalem, I joined a new community for their kabbalat shabbat service. That Friday, this new community, called Tzion, was having a musical service outside at the new tachana risbona – the first station - an open space, with restaurants and shops at the location of the first train station in Jerusalem. After the musical kabbalat shabbat- with hundreds of attendees, a small group of participants went to a corner to daven the evening service. The rabbi of this new community, a dear friend of mine, honored me by asking me to lead the service. It was a short and sweet moment; just a few people standing there, in this nice open space outside. In that moment, I noticed something significant: I was not afraid. I was davening outside in a public space in Jerusalem, and I was not afraid of being attacked. Almost fourteen years earlier on Shavuot, when I led services at the Kotel for an egalitarian minyan, we were attacked by the Haredi, the Ultra-Orthodox people surrounding us. Since then, I have been afraid of egalitarian religious demonstrations and prayers in Jerusalem and I also felt really pessimistic about the future of that city. Though my experience that
Friday night was an exception to the sad reality of hatred that still exists in Israel, those few moments made me feel like everything is possible. Like 1989 in Chile, I had a glimpse of the possibility of real change.

We just heard the beautiful reading of the Haftarah for Yom Kippur, a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah. The Haftarah begins with a call to rebuild the road, to move any blocks, any obstacles that are in the way so that God’s people can live in freedom. The prophet raises his voice crying out, loud and clear, that religious ritual without moral action does not achieve the goals of a fast day, and concludes by reminding us that it is through Shabbat that we can get closer to the possibility of redemption.

Every year I find this reading powerful. I am in awe of the choice to read this particular chapter on Yom Kippur. On the day that we focus on self-reflection, through prayer and fast, we are told loud and clear that we have the moral obligation to act in the world and that our fast does not count if we do not hear this message.

Isaiah teaches us: feed the hungry; clothe the naked; house the homeless; heal the wounded. On Yom Kippur we ought to hear this message of responsibility for our brothers and sisters. We, each of us, are the keepers of our brothers and sisters. Isaiah stands and says: have hope; have faith; God will be with you. When you take care of the least fortunate among you, God will be there. The possibility of redemption and hope is in your hands.

The end of the Haftarah raises an important question. Why does Isaiah emphasize the ritual of Shabbat observance just a few paragraphs after de-emphasizing the importance of fasting? Isn’t Isaiah upset that we focus too
much on ritual and not enough on action? Why introduce Shabbat, at the end of the Haftarah? Isn’t Shabbat just another set of rituals?

There is a wonderful teaching by Rabbi Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl, known as the Me’or Eynayim. He quotes the following teaching from the Zohar: “Shabbat is the name of the blessed Holy One, perfect in all aspects” (2:88b) and explains that this means that the essence of Shabbat is the experience that nothing is lacking. He writes: “A person engages in work in response to a need. There is something lacking that will be completed through the work. Shabbat, being perfect in all aspects, lacks nothing, and needs no work to fulfill any need. Therefore our sages taught that you should celebrate Shabbat as if all your work is done and you lack nothing (Mekhilta Yitro). On Shabbat, the completely perfect divinity spreads forth and revels itself in the Israelite people” (Quoted from Speaking Truth, Rabbi Art Green, Volume 2, page 161). On Shabbat, teaches us this Hassidic Master, we behave as if, there is no need of any work, any fixing, any tikkun, spiritual and physical. On Shabbat we experience the possibility of total redemption. On Shabbat, on this very day, we believe everything is possible.

Shabbat teaches us that we have to allow ourselves to really taste the experience of everything being okay, of peace and wholeness and redemption, in order to truly believe that it is possible in our world. How can we believe that something is truly possible if we have never allowed experiencing at least a taste of it?

Professor Avi Ravitzky, former Head of the of Jewish Philosophy department at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, once said: “There are two ways to destroy a beautiful ideal. One is to throw it to the ground and trample all over it. The other is to throw it so high in the sky that it becomes
completely out of reach.” Shabbat is a taste of the World to Come, Me'en Olam Habab, Shabbat is about not throwing the hopes of redemption so high in the sky, that we can not reach them.

I spent a few years practicing Jewish Meditation in Jerusalem, with a wonderful teacher, Rabbi David Zeller, of blessed memory. We would meet every Wednesday night for three hours, for meditation, chanting and learning. Rabbi Zeller, spoke about Shabbat not as a day, but as a state of conciseness. He would begin every session by connecting between the word lashevet – to sit and the word Shabbat. He encouraged us to sit in meditation in such a way that would bring Shabbat into everything we do. After a while, Wednesday nights really did begin to feel a bit like Shabbat.

I am sure that many of you share with me the sense that things are going really wrong in the world. Often, I feel scared, and pessimistic. When thinking about this past year with all the violence, wars, hunger, killings, racial injustice, environmental catastrophes, and so much more, I feel a sense of despair and profound sadness. But the teaching of Isaiah reminds me that there is a way out. I find solace in knowing that, despite the all forms of malice, we have the capacity to do good and to create a better future.

Many of us are familiar with a quote of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice". Reverend King himself was actually quoting Theodore Parker, a Unitarian Minister born in 1810 who called for the abolition of slavery. Parker wrote:

“Look at the facts of the world.
You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right.
I do not pretend to understand the moral universe,
the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways.
I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure
by the experience of sight;
I can divine it by conscience.
But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice”.

We are spending the day together as a community, in song and retrospection. We will conclude the day with our beautiful Neila service, surrounded by our friends and children. More than anything else they remind us of the beauty that surrounds us, and of the possibilities ahead of us. I ask that we not forget the message of Isaiah, to believe truly and fully that by taking responsibility a day will come, not at the end of the days, but soon, that peace will prevail. Each of us can live this out in different ways- some of you in the professional work you do, some of you by volunteering, whether through TBZ and its tikkun olam projects and group, or through other groups and organizations. By making this a priority, we are teaching our children, our community and reaffirming for ourselves, that there is a real possibility for redemption Bimhera Beyamenu, speedily in OUR time, and that perhaps one day- the newspaper will be as “boring” as it gets, reporting news of beautiful flowers, the birth of animals in the Zoo and new colors in the rainbow.