

## **Hope In a Dark World**

**Erev Rosh Hashanah 2018/5779**

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A story from the “Wise men of Chelm”: No one from Chelm can agree when it comes to the idea of building a bridge across the river that flows through the city. The merchants think it will be good for business to bring people easily from one side to the other. The young professionals will only contribute if the bridge is aesthetically pleasing. A third, younger group, will only contribute if the bridge serves no real business purpose. It should just be for walking on. And so, the people of Chelm never do build any bridge at all. (Sharon Barcan Elswit. The Jewish Story Finder: A Guide to 668 Tales Listing

Subjects and Sources (Kindle Locations 3941-3942)

The stories of the Wise Men of Chelm have been around for hundreds of years. When presented with a problem-- the “sages” of Chelm think, they think some more, and from these ideas, they

cook up the dumbest solution imaginable— that make you shake your head, provide a wry smile.

When life is dark, difficult, or confusing, tales that provided comic relief or expressed frustration are not uncommon. The satire, nonsense, and parables of Chelm provided hope for Eastern European Jewish communities as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, who desperately needed them.

It seems to me that that the stories of Chelm are well in need today, as well.

Just as the people of Chelm struggled to respond to difficult times, so too, do we. There is uncertainty and unpredictability about our nation, which feels unique. From migrant children still separated from their parents, to continued mass shootings that have not inspired gun control, to ongoing investigations within our government agencies, to revelations about abuses of power against women-- this list goes on. Further, we are isolated within our small communities of agreement. When we find ourselves disagreeing,

we are more likely to ostracize and demonize than to through the issues. The vitriol, inability to work together, and “othering” of each other has driven an enormous wedge—a wedge that is seemingly insurmountable. It has brought anger, frustration and even despair.

As I have prepared for the High Holy Days this year, I have been asked this question, over and over again: Rabbi, will you bring us some hope?

Indeed.

From various definitions of hope: to cherish a desire with anticipation; to look forward to something; to desire an outcome; Hope is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large. My definition: Hope is the belief that something will get better. ( definitions from wikipedia, merriam webster)

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: “Hope is a conviction, rooted in trust...an ability to soar above the darkness that overshadows the divine.”

And so this Rosh Hashanah, I offer some support, some ideas, to help us to soar above the darkness that overshadows the divine.

Our ancient rabbis taught: “the highest form of wisdom is kindness”. Our rabbis were on to something: psychologists have noted that when the world seems dark, offering even a simple act of kindness can help restore a feeling of hope. Imagine, something so simple: Kindness restores hope.

When I graduated from the University of Pittsburgh, the commencement speaker was none other than Fred Rogers- Mr. Rogers himself. There was actually some grumbling that the University had taken the “easy way out”, as Mr. Rogers was from Pittsburgh!

I don’t remember much of the actual speech; rather I remember the feeling—the feeling of warmth and joy. In those moments,

surrounded by thousands of other graduates, I recognized the profound impact that the childhood television show, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, had on my life. For there was Fred Rogers, speaking to thousands of graduates, and he radiated kindness as if he could see each and every one of us.

This summer the documentary about his show, Mister Rogers Neighborhood was released, entitled *Won't You Be My Neighbor*.

About the movie, director Morgan Neville said, “At a time when there isn't a lot of optimism...It's this idea that kindness is not quaint and naive and old-fashioned but that kindness is essential to going forward. And I think a lot of people feel that way.”

Fred Rogers was for more than a generation a cardigan-wearing real life superhero. His thoughtful eyes, gentle speech and strong spirit taught that kindness *is* hope. The surprising success of the decades-long run of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood was based not only his talent, ambition and drive—it was also based on good psychological research, which Fred Rogers continued throughout

his work. He taught millions that kindness was beautiful, important, and strong. He is famous for saying:

“There are three ways to ultimate success:

The first way is to be kind.

The second way is to be kind.

The third way is to be kind.”

Fred Rogers was able to articulate kindness through his television show. With this, he brought hope to so many. How we actively do this on a daily basis, isn't always so clear, however, as Ms. Orly Wahba, a middle school teacher from New York city, learned.

Recognizing that middle school is a difficult age, an age when it is easy to lose hope, she began a project. She created acts of kindness cards. She then challenged her students to not only complete the act of kindness written on the card, but then to also hand out the card to someone.

To her surprise, the students were very excited about the cards.

They followed her instructions, completing each act of kindness

and eagerly passing out the cards wherever they were. From these actions, they started seeing *opportunities* for kindness everywhere. Because it was hard to explain what they were experiencing, how deeply they were impacted by these simple cards, she created a film. To their shock the video went viral. It was seen by 20 million people. The message of spreading kindness was inspiring and gave them hope. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyrsCtme76M>)

Her belief is that acts of kindness can brighten the world. Wahba shared her story in a TED talk, ending with this line: “The extraordinary effects of an ordinary act can in fact, change this world.” Wahba has started an organization to spread kindness. It’s called Life Vest Inside: *because kindness keeps the world afloat*.

<http://www.lifestinside.com/get-involved/aokcards/>

Wahba taught that small acts of kindness can have a profound effect on others—and can, with one act, shift the lives of millions of people.

Fred Rogers lived kindness through the example of his life and his work. Their work helped many soar above the darkness and bring hope. May we learn, and be inspired, by kindness.

To truly soar above the darkness – to restore hope, we likely need more than one path. As a nation in pain, more divided than ever before, it's no surprise that we turn to superheroes, again and again, for hope. This year was, once more, a blockbuster year for superhero movies.

This year the superhero movie releases, such as Black Panther, reflected the needs and reality of world—more nuanced and deeper than ever before, with deep lessons to glean. I'll share one, from the movie Black Panther. I'm going to share a complete summary from Black Panther-- spoiler alert!

Set in the hidden African nation of Wakanda, young T'Challa becomes king after his father is killed. He is not king long before trouble begins; problems that his father had hidden from him for many years. You see, it is only in Wakanda that the strongest



metal in the world, called Vibranium, can be found. Vibranium can also be used to make the sophisticated technology, not yet available—or known about—anywhere else on earth. Wakanda conserves its' Vibranium, by presenting itself to the world as a very poor nation. Enter the villain/ nemesis, Erik “Killmonger”, an American mercenary soldier, who, unbeknownst to King T’challah and his family, is directly related to the royal family. Killmonger ascends briefly to power, violently and angrily. His methods of ascent are flawed, but in his ascent he asks piercing questions that rock the small nation: *Who gives you the right to hold onto resources when others are in such need? What will Wakanda do with what they have to make the world better for those who do not have?* After significant struggle with these questions, as well as physical loss, the nation comes to recognize their place in the world anew. A profound answer comes at the end of the movie. King T’challah, comes to a United Nations- like assembly and makes a brief speech: "Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We

cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this Earth should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe."

When I went to see Black Panther, this speech got a round of applause. It helped us believe that we could "soar above the darkness that overshadows the divine."

How did it do this? It reminded us of the power and importance of community. As Rabbi Hillel taught so long ago: *Al tifrosh min hatzibor*: do not separate yourself from the community. Our isolated communities, where we all agree with one another, are, as King T'challah demonstrated, eminently limiting. Only when we recognize how much we have much to offer one another, how much we can teach each other, can we build bridges.

A community of respect and connection was the central tenet of our rabbinic tradition, and how the Talmud, the text of that tradition, was created. The goal was to capture everyone's words into the text. Rabbi Hillel (again—he was eminently quotable) wrote, "*Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim*: These and these are the words of the living God." By capturing every opinion, every debate, every argument—losing or winning-- the entire community was treated as holy.

I wrote most of the words of this sermon before John McCain died. John McCain's funeral served for many of us as a unifying moment. Senator McCain was a statesman who served his beloved country and who built deep and lasting relationships no matter the "side". As Joe Biden said during his eulogy, "My name is My name is Joe Biden. I'm a Democrat. And I loved John McCain."

After he died, Senator McCain wrote a letter to America, which reads in part: "We weaken it[America] when we hide behind walls, rather than tear them down, when we doubt the power of our

ideals, rather than trust them to be the great force for change they have always been.”

He continued, “We are three-hundred-and-twenty-five million opinionated, vociferous individuals. We argue and compete and sometimes even vilify each other in our raucous public debates. But we have always had so much more in common with each other than in disagreement. If only we remember that and give each other the benefit of the presumption that we all love our country we will get through these challenging times. We will come through them stronger than before. We always do.”

This letter is filled with hope. It clearly imagines the possibility of better times—times when we learn from one another; times when we come together again in real community. From Black Panther to Jewish tradition to our honored statesmen: let us learn from one another; let us come together to build together.

Together, will be able to soar above the darkness that overshadows the divine- together, we will find hope.

Tonight, we looked for hope in a darkened world.

I know hope has been hard to find.

I pray that kindness, learning from one another and building community—these will help us find hope.

Tonight, I pray that our hope will be rekindled.

( light candle)

A wonderful teacher, Rav Kook, said this: “If you find yourself in a dark place, don’t waste your time cursing the darkness, just light a candle...”

A candle is a small thing.

The candlelight gives us a a little bit of light when the world is dark. A candle can remind us that we can break the darkness, we can soar above it.

When we are struggling with hope, when darkness seeps in, may you remember this image. May it inspire you to be kind to others, knowing it will ignite hope. May its’ flickering flame inspire you to connect and build bridges of community. May we remember that it

only takes one flame to help us to soar above the darkness to  
uncover the shadows.