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## Practicing Radical Hope

I have a friend who is going to get rich. Tomorrow. Really, I mean every time I see her she tells me about her plans. She always has plans. Plans to sell this, plans to sell that. She's going to write a book and she's going to start a business and she's going to become a coach or a consultant or maybe something else. She is so hopeful, so upbeat, and so deeply in debt. She is strangled by her dreams, deceived by her optimism. Her hope is like an addiction, preventing her from making choices that might help her actually support her family.

My cousin is obsessed with her kids but not in a good way. She wants them to be the best. They're only 11 and 14, but she already she's fretting about what colleges they'll go to. She has such big hopes for them, for what they will achieve. She interferes in their lives – a lot – because she wants them to make right friendships, do the right extracurricular activities, get the highest grades. I see how her kids resent her. As she charts out their future she is so stressed out by her expectations of them.

A former neighbor of mine had stage four cancer. When he was dying his son demanded that he try every experimental drug they could get their hands on. His dad was going to beat the odds. He would be a survivor. Accompanying him to every doctor's appointment he pushed and he pushed and he pushed. Finally, emaciated from the disease, my neighbor said that he had had enough. He loved his son, he didn't want to die, but he was done with the fight. He was ready to live his last weeks in peace. His son was furious. How could his father have abandoned hope?

It was these stories that led me, last Kol Nidrei, to give an anti-hope sermon, to challenge that having hope is always a good thing. It was a sermon about loss, and about acceptance, and how hope could sometimes prevent us from coming to terms with difficult issues. I wrote:

We rely on hope to save us, to steer us towards a better life, a better future. But hope can be toxic. Hope can consume us and lead us to reject possibilities all around us, because we think there might be something better to come. Hope leaves us stuck in the past or stuck in the future, forcing us to abandon the present. Instead of accepting and even embracing our fragility and vulnerability and imperfections, it lets us believe that there is some perfect future we can aspire to.

I still think it's true, though in retrospect it might have been a little strong. But I object to the kind of hope – or perhaps optimism is a better word – that I see it in my friend's fantasies about getting rich, her inability to look honestly at her failures, and make some painful decisions so she can better support her family. I see it in my cousin's refusal to embrace, even honor, her

kids' imperfections, to love them for who they are, and gently guide their decisions without manipulating them. I saw it in my neighbor's son's unwillingness to accept that his father was dying, in his preoccupation with his father's survival at any cost, and to really just be there for him and comfort him as he died.

We believe, sometimes, that if we are just strong enough and brave enough then we can harness enough hope to make it through tough times. We think that hope will carry us through to the other side, help us endure the present moment, keep us committed to our goals, ideals, or dreams. We think that hope is what we need to change ourselves and change the world.

Without hope, we believe, we will succumb to despair. And if despair is unequivocally bad, then hope must be unequivocally good.

It feels strange to criticize hope, especially when it feels like so much of my job description is to peddle hope – supporting people in difficult times, helping people be courageous at challenging moments, persuading people that Judaism is important and meaningful, arguing that what we do in our lives matters, creating opportunities to engage with difficult issues in the world around us. It seems like as a rabbi I not only need to have hope but to put forth a vision of hope.

What's more, it sort of feels like Jewish tradition is against me on this one – maybe not all of Jewish tradition, but certainly most contemporary Jewish thinkers. Everything I read is so “pro-hope.” As former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “...No Jew, who is a true Jew, can ever give up hope.”

Or just google “High Holiday sermon” and “hope” and you'll see page after page about how hope is what led the Jewish people to survive for thousands of years. Without hope Abraham would never have left home and gone to a land he did not know. Without hope the Israelites would never have fled Egypt. Without hope the Israelites would have given up during their forty-year journey through the desert.

This is a pretty shallow vision of hope, this belief that things will definitely get better at some future time, as if that's the essence of the Jewish experience.

But come on. You can read just about any kind of belief or feeling into these stories, that's what makes them so interesting. I want to reread them with a deeper vision of hope, one that's firmly grounded in the present, one that's steeped with realism and acceptance, one where we live with a full range of emotions. So how about:

Abraham was that rare person who could live authentically in the present. When God told him to leave everything he knew and to go to a new land, he felt afraid, but he was willing to take a risk. He trusted God, and he trusted himself.

Or, in spite of their skepticism, the Israelites packed their bags and escaped from Egypt. They did not know whether life would be better as free people, and at times they doubted God and Moses. But their desire to be free propelled them forward through the terrifying waters of the Sea.

Or, the Israelites lost hope time after time after time as they wandered in the desert, but in their journey they came to realize that they could complain and rebel or they could accept the new challenges before them. In moving towards the Promised Land they grew as individuals and as a people and continued learning every step of the way.

The stories we tell about our ancestors reflect much more about us than about them.

And I want to tell stories that help us confront the world as it is, in all its richness. Peddling hope feels like such a simplistic approach when we are trying to navigate our tremendously complex world.

Part of why I dislike this shallow kind of hope is that it prevents us from doing the hard work of looking closely at who we are, in this moment. As the writer, Miguel Clark Mallet, argues, hope allows us to live “too much in the rosy future and far too little in the messy present.” My friend who believes riches are just around the corner ignores her present responsibility to her family. My cousin who is so concerned with her kids’ future achievement is creating a lot of anxiety for them right now. My neighbor’s son who kept pushing his father to extend his life robbed his father of precious time in the last weeks of his life.

There’s a political component to this as well. As many of us verge on despair over the state of our country, it’s only natural that we focus on hope – we look forward to the next election, the next investigation, the next win with hope. But this can cause us to lose sight of the present. We cannot control the future, or even what happens next on health care or immigration or tax reform. The only thing we can control is how we act right now.

Mallet’s focus is on the intersection of the personal, the social, and the spiritual. He writes:

At my best, I answer what each moment and my values call me to do. Sometimes it’s to rest, to reflect. Sometimes it’s to play. Sometimes it’s to connect with friends and loved ones. Sometimes it’s to struggle, critique, speak out. Sometimes to listen. Sometimes to celebrate. Sometimes to grieve. Each moment makes its demand, and I’m seeking the kind of life where I hear and answer that need as often as I can. Contrary to our control-obsessed culture, the alternative to hope isn’t passivity or despair. It’s living. It’s being humble and real. It’s being here. ([On Being](#), September 18, 2017)

I love this piece, which is from an essay called “We’ve Hoped Our Way Into Our Current Crisis.” Each moment demands us to be humble and real. To really be present – to ourselves, to our families, to the world before us.

Where Mallet sees hope as the culprit, I’ve also come to appreciate that we can think about hope in multiple ways, and to hold onto it in all of its complexity.

The Dominican-American author, Junot Díaz, wrote a much-read essay, “Under President Trump, Radical Hope Is Our Best Weapon,” shortly after the election. He counsels that in the aftermath of the election we need to “connect courageously with the rejection, the fear, the vulnerability” that we might be feeling and to “bear witness to what we have lost: our safety,

our sense of belonging, our vision of our country.” We need to mourn so that “repair will be possible.”

And then he argues that we need to hope.

He’s not talking about blind optimism, but about what the philosopher Jonathan Lear calls “radical hope.” In Lear’s words, “What makes this hope *radical* is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is.” Díaz explains that you don’t *have* hope, you *practice* hope. “[It] demands flexibility, openness, and what Lear describes as ‘imaginative excellence.’” ([The New Yorker](#), November 21, 2016)

I’ve thought a lot about what it means to practice hope, to move past what is before us and to imagine new possibilities. Not clutching onto a naïve or as he says a blind optimism, but cultivating a flexible, open frame of mind that inches us beyond our fears so we do not start to believe that we will always be stuck in our present reality.

We can practice hope in not only the political arena but in our personal lives.

I imagine my friend practicing radical hope by connecting to what is really happening in her life, confronting her insecurity, dealing with her vulnerability, and learning how to work toward a different outcome. Not one full of riches, but one that’s grounded in reality, where she accepts responsibility for her situation and makes different choices.

I imagine my cousin practicing radical hope, letting go of her unyielding expectations, allowing her children’s lives to unfold in ways that she could never have foreseen. It would mean giving up some control, even watching them fail. And it would mean helping them pick themselves up and learn from their mistakes.

I imagine my neighbor’s son practicing radical hope, learning how to go on living without his father, learning to navigate life without him, finding unexpected possibilities on his way. He would have to mourn his loss deeply, and not sidestep a very painful process, but it would allow him to grow in new ways.

The writer, historian, and activist, Rebecca Solnit, has a similar understanding of hope, one that is explicitly connected to action. Like practicing radical hope, Solnit tells us that we must confront the uncomfortable reality that we do not know what will happen in the future. Hope is not about pretending that terrible things are not occurring; hope is about embracing an unknown future. In the “spaciousness of uncertainty,” she writes, we can and must act.

Solnit instructs us to learn from history and to recognize that people’s actions matter. Change is absolutely possible – though she writes that “sometimes it’s as complex as chaos theory and as slow as evolution.” That’s why she cautions us against giving up. She cautions us against “the tailspin of mutual wailing about how bad everything.” Doing this buries “any hope and imagination down in a dank little foxhole of curled-up despair.” (WNYC – On the Media, [“Rebecca Solnit on Hope, Lies, and Making Change,”](#) January 12, 2017 and [The Guardian, “Hope is an Embrace of the Unknown: Rebecca Solnit in Dark Times,”](#) July 15, 2016)

I appreciate that we need to embrace uncertainty, and hold onto a deep belief that change can happen. This is what hope is all about.

On Yom Kippur we come together to affirm that change is possible. We can change ourselves and our relationships and our world. We can do teshuvah – turning towards our best selves – and imagine a new future.

It's true that change can be as complex as chaos theory and as slow as evolution, but we have an obligation to ourselves, to our loved ones, and to the future of our country not to get stuck. Not to get stuck in fantasies of the future, not get stuck in memories of the past, and not to get stuck in narrow understandings of the present.

But to live fully, being humble and real. Seeing ourselves for who we really are, confronting hard truths, becoming the people we want to become.

And knowing that we do have the power to create change.

*Gmar chatimah tovah.*