

Hope Springs Eternal (February 2008)

The course of our lives—a steady unfolding stream of days—travels in a straight line, from birth to death. But this journey endures an equally rhythmic pulse that is anything but linear. Rather, its flow is more akin to a series of waves—like a pendulum—swinging to and fro, up and down, back and forth, from day to day. From joy to sadness, and love to loss, from failure to success and sickness to health, we somehow figure out a way to navigate this odyssey we call life. Except when we don't. When the sea is most tumultuous, when these swings dramatically heave us into an emotional and physical and spiritual abyss, we wonder how—or if—we will ever regain our balance?

During our Torah Tish discussion this past month, a small light turned on for me. Employing the polarity of these vicissitudes within the history of our people, Rav Kook describes a Jew's relationship to the Jewish people as one whom "feels grieved in her afflictions and delight in her hopes" [Orot Hakodesh, Lights of Holiness]. In reading this text aloud, I was immediately struck by its apparent lack of symmetry. I mean, just as the verbs "grieved" and "delight" are at opposite ends of the emotional spectrum, I would have expected the parallel noun to "afflictions" be "victories" or "successes" or even "joys"—but not hope. It just stands to reason that the opposite of "affliction" should be something that...exists. After all, an "affliction" is tangible and real, something you experience and endure. But hope is about what doesn't exist. Or is it?

So often we think of hope as a state of mind firmly fixated on what is not yet. Hope is the future, the unrealized present. Hope is praying and dreaming. But, of course, so much for which we hope will never come to be. And we know it. Yet we continue embracing our hope as a precious gift, unwilling to allow anyone to pry it from our grasp. More than just a positive view to the future, more than the articulation of our dreams, hope is the very essence of our existence. It is the oxygen of our soul. It is what gives us the courage to rise in the morning. Hope is what allows us to manage the raging sea of our lives.

The mistake we make is thinking that when life is at its most unsteady what we need is strength, but strength only helps us to hold on—not to prevail. To emerge from the storm, only hope can give us the vision we need to step forward and confront the next day. Indeed, as Rav Kook subtly suggests, hope is more than just affliction's facing partner on the scale of life's extremes—it is its elixir.

“Hope springs eternal.” I now understand that this is nothing more than a poetic way of saying, hope is not merely what gets us through life, hope is life. Even better, hope is living. And its opposite is not dying but rather existing.

So Torah implores us, Choose life. And thus our people’s anthem, Hatikvah—The Hope. More than just the articulation of a national dream, Hatikvah is the reflection of what it means to be a Jew. Ours is a tradition that embraces the fullness of life—as Rav Kook teaches—with delight.