

## **Choosing Optimism**

**Rabbi Mona Alfi**

**March 20, 2020**

When I was growing up it was apparent to me that my home was not like my friends homes. In my home we never bought or threw away rubber bands. In fact we had a drawer with a giant rubber band ball. When we brought in the morning paper, the rubber band went on the ball. If we needed something to attack our siblings with, we could go to the rubber band ball. We also had an aluminum foil ball, and recycled our newspapers, cans and bottles, way before it was fashionable, or at all easy, to do so.

And then there was our kitchen pantry and fridge, it was always overflowing with food. There was always enough food on hand to feed a family of 6 for several weeks without having to go to the grocery store. And no one left a visit to our house without a goody bag, so they would have a little nosh for the road.

And lastly, there was a dish that we had most Saturday nights, that I never saw served anywhere else. It was something we lovingly called "Garbage Stew." Despite the name, it was actually quite delicious. What it was, was all of our leftovers from the week, leftover chicken or beef, soup, veggies, potatoes, Chinese food, whatever leftovers were in the fridge at the end of the week didn't get thrown out, they got thrown into a giant stew pot, and along with some delicious crusty bread that was our Saturday night special.

So why was my home so different than that of my peers? Because I was raised by my grandparents. Rose and Eddy were children of immigrants who by the time they were my age now, had lived through losing their fathers at ages 4 and 6, celebrated the end of WWI before they graduated from elementary school, came of age right as the Great Depression hit, and had 4 children under the age of 5 when the US entered WWII.

I was raised by two people who had experienced tremendous personal losses and hardship. And yet, when they would tell me the stories of their life, it was filled joy and excitement, stories of people coming together in times of crises, everyone pitching in doing their share, helping whoever needed it, and not just making do, but doing what they could to make life better.

I rarely heard stories about how hard or horrible things were, rather, if I was feeling down, they would tell me stories of how they responded to the difficulties life had thrown their way.

Yes, their fathers had died tragically young. But their families also pulled together to help their mothers.

Yes, the Depression was hard. But how lucky they felt because they had already moved to California, and they didn't have it as hard as their family back east, because they could grow a vegetable garden and didn't have to pay heating bills or need heavy winter clothing, and there were fabulous things to do for free like go to Griffith Park or the beach.

Yes, WWII was a scary time, and they lost not only relatives because of the war, but they also tragically

lost one of their children, putting my grandfather into a year long depression. But they talked about how their friends and family stood by them through that darkest of time, and they made it through the other side, and learned to smile and laugh and love again.

What I learned from their stories was that even in the most difficult times, joy could be found and love could be shared.

I learned from them that a person could be pragmatic and an optimist at the same time. That it's ok to prepare for the worst, but don't forget to enjoy and appreciate what you can in the moment.

Why was their kitchen always fully stocked? Because they never forgot the poverty of their childhood or how quickly everything was lost in the Great Depression. They were always ready for disaster to hit.

So then why did they always make sure that who ever left their home had a goody bag? Because they also knew that if you are blessed to have more than you need, it feels good to share what you have with others.

We are living in a very uncertain time. The news changes not daily, but throughout the day. We are being asked to restrict our movements, to change the way we conduct ourselves and our business, people are losing their jobs, and we're being reminded that what we do affects not only us and our loved ones, but the health and safety of everyone around us.

I have been asked over and over in the last week how can I be so optimistic. And I wonder, how could I not be? I can choose to live in fear of the unknown, or I can choose to see the blessings that are right in front of me.

I am a student of Jewish sacred texts and Jewish history.

And if I have learned nothing, it is this, life is more times than not, complicated and hard and even terrifying. And it rarely gives us what we want or what we expect. And while we cannot control what happens to us, we can control how we respond.

I have often said that our morning prayers are best understood if you imagine yourself to be Tevye the Milkman from Fiddler on the Roof.

He has a hard life, more mouths to feed than he can afford. The Cossacks can come at any moment to either kill him or drive him from his home.

And yet, every morning he wakes up and says "Modeh ani l'fanecha melech chai v'kayam shehechezarta bi nish'mati b'chemla raba emunatecha. - I give thanks before you, eternal Ruler of life, for You have returned within me my soul with compassion; abundant is Your faithfulness!"

With these words he is saying: Life is a gift. No matter how hard, how scary, how chaotic it may be. It is a gift that is not to be squandered. It is a gift that we should say thank you for over and over. And with those words he is given the strength to go on for another day.

But even an optimist like Tevye, or myself, can get tired and worn-down. And that is why we have Shabbat. The purpose of Shabbat is not only to cease from work, but to come away refreshed by it, ready to face another week believing it can be better than the one that came before it.

In last week's Torah Portion, Parashat Ki Tisa, we were given the beautiful words that we sing each and every Shabbat, words that were given as a Mitzvah – as a commandment, but a mitzvah that we recognize was really a gift.

V'shamru v'nei Yisrael  
et HaShabbat,  
laasot et HaShabbat l'dorotam  
b'rit olam.  
Beini u'vein b'nei Yisrael  
ot hi l'olam,  
ki sheishet yamim asah Adonai  
et hashamayim v'et haaretz,  
u'vayom hashvi-i shavat vayinafash.

The people of Israel shall keep Shabbat,  
observing Shabbat throughout the ages as a covenant for all time.  
It is a sign for all time between Me and the people of Israel.  
For in six days Adonai made heaven and earth,  
and on the seventh day God ceased from work and was refreshed.

“U'vayom hashvi-i shavat vayinafash – on the seventh day God CEASED from work and was refreshed.”

Right now we have been given a mandatory Shabbat, not just for a day, but for the foreseeable future. But what we are also given is the opportunity to come away from this time refreshed, and renewed. Ready to face life's challenges once again with a new perspective.

I pray that when this all ends, we will stop looking at what divides us and be grateful for what brings us together.

I pray that we will be eager to listen and not just to talk.

I pray that when we come back together it will be with love and not mistrust.

We have the opportunity right now not only to count our blessings, but to put our world back into the proper perspective and the proper order.

Are we still healthy? Baruch HaShem! (Thank God!)  
Do we have a home where we can wait this through? Baruch HaShem!  
Can I feed my family? Baruch HaShem!  
Do I have enough that I can share with others? Baruch HaShem!

What have I learned from my grandparents and from Jewish history? That there is always a reason to be grateful if we are willing to keep our eyes and our hearts open to it.

So tonight, I give thanks for knowing that my community is with me, each safe in their own homes. I give thanks for the gift of another day. And I give thanks for the gift for this day of Shabbat and the opportunity to rest and feel refreshed once again.