On Hope and Optimism

Rabbi Rachel Safman – Kol Nidrei address – 5782 (Temple Beth-El, Ithaca, NY)

Those of you who knew me twenty-some-odd years ago, when I was a graduate student at Cornell, may remember the golden retriever that I kept – and who kept me – in that era (and for more than a decade thereafter). Her name was Davka, a Yiddish and Hebrew expression that refers to something that is done in an intentionally contrarian way. One can speak of something *davka* happening – in the sense of an action that is contrary to expectations – or of "doing davka," deliberately sabotaging the will of an individual or a system. And related to this is the slightly milder use of the term to describe a decision made "just because." It was primarily in this last sense that my companion validated her name. For as anyone who has owned a retriever can tell you, there is nothing they like better than to throw a bit of unanticipated chaos into the mix – not from spite, but simply because they can.

What almost none of you probably know is that long before I had Davka, I had Tikvah. No, Tikvah was not another dog – in fact, was not a companion animal of any sort. "Tikvah" is the Hebrew word for "hope," and for years I lived with Tikvah because I couldn't get a dog because my younger brother suffered asthma of such severity that we were warned that bringing any furry or feathered creature into the house could be a death sentence for him.

So, in place of a dog, my third-grade self purchased a leash. After all, leashes generate no dander and yet are strongly associated with pets. So, I reasoned, I might as well lay the foundations of pet ownership while biding my time.

Although I could not have explained it at the time, my response to the circumstantial impossibility of pet-ownership was, in its own way, a very Jewish response. In contrast to the conceptualization of hope that prevails in our broader society, epitomized by Alexander Pope's oft-quoted dictum, "Hope springs eternal," the Jewish notion of hope is a good deal more prosaic – and labor-intensive. But it also has in it an element of agency, which I believe makes it an apt message for our audience this morning – the audience of people sitting in this sanctuary, or joining this service by Zoom, or experiencing similar services in similar venues or venue-less presentations around the country or around the world. Indeed, I would venture that the Jewish message on hope is an appropriate one for almost anyone who has ridden out the past eighteen months of prospects raised and hopes dashed amidst devitalizing conditions of isolation, economic uncertainty and palpable danger to health.

But I get ahead of myself. Let me start by talking about hope, both as Jews and as some of our non-Jewish neighbors conceive of it. I would also like to explain what I think recommends the former way of framing the discussion.

Let's begin by looking at that quote by Alexander Pope, taken from his poem "An Essay on Man." Pope was a man of faith, a consummate though not necessarily particularly devote Catholic. He was also descended from a long line of Britons who had resided for countless generations amongst the windswept leas and manicured hedgerows of the British Isles.

From that perspective, a perspective of stability and constancy, benevolence and plenty, it perhaps seemed natural for Pope to express hope as the all-but-inevitable condition of the human psyche. "Just wait long enough," Pope's adage asserts, "and the adverse circumstances of the moment will right themselves. Things will get back to 'normal'."

"Normal" from a Jewish perspective has historically looked quite different from the conditions that Pope and his ancestors experienced. Throughout the generations, Jews have been driven from their host countries (including the British Isles) and subjected to abuse, derision, violence, disenfranchisement and mortal danger. For a hundred generations and more, uncertainty and adverse conditions have seemed a pretty safe guess as to what the future would hold for Jews, at least if your forecast was based on past performance.

Yet as the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has asserted, Jews have perennially been masters of hope. Indeed, he asserts, our particular brand of hope is one of the Jewish people's great legacies to humanity, and he credits this – at least in part – to Judaism's overwhelmingly forward-looking orientation. In contrast to all other civilizations, Sacks has claimed, Judaism places its "golden age" not in the past but in the future. In this sense, our outlook as a people is aspirational.

Without denying Sacks' claim, I believe there is another dimension of the Jewish perspective on hope that has buoyed our people along through the generations, and that I for one find exceptionally compelling in our own age. It has to do with a distinction that Sacks himself drew (in a different context) between "optimism" and "hope."

"Optimism," Sacks explains, "is the belief that things are going to get better. Hope [by contrast] is the belief that we can make things better …" Herein lies the contrast between the optimism that Pope expressed – a state of mind that surely buoys those who subscribe to it but leaves little recourse for those with a less sunny view of the past and future – and the hope that I believe Jews have cultivated, actively and sometimes against ridiculous odds, for generations.

To gain some insights into what this Jewish notion of hope looks like, I would like to walk with you through a set of classic Jewish texts – Biblical texts, in fact – that I believe exemplify for us, as they have for Jews throughout the ages – what it looks like to cultivate hope, especially in times when despair might have seemed more natural.

God-willing, it is a skill set that we will not have to hone much longer.

Hagar

The first of the scriptural texts that I want to invoke as an example of "Jewish hope" is one that we read together just over a week ago on the first morning of Rosh Hashanah. It is the story of Hagar and Ishmael and their expulsion from Abraham's camp. If ever there was a situation that called for despair, this is it! The pair find themselves in an arid wilderness, under the blazing midday sun, without food or water. The mother is so despondent that she abandons her son and distances herself from him, that she not witness his death.

But then comes the voice of an angel, of her better self, calling to her, saying: Pick yourself up. Go to your child. Look once more to the horizon, for there resides a cause for hope.

By now Hagar must be protesting with ever muscle in her body. She is tired. She is despondent. She is in intense psychic pain. But under the encouragement of the angel, she somehow summons the wherewithal to do as he requests. And lo and behold, on the horizon's edge, is a well.

We can debate among ourselves whether the well was there before she looked for it, or if it appeared only in that instant. In a sense, the question is irrelevant, for what is clear is that had she not looked in that moment, she would have remained unaware of the well's existence and would have perished, along with her son.

The message of this part of Hagar's story is two-fold. First, that sometimes hope itself is the solution, tiding us over during the "dry spells" so that we can arrive at the periods of greater fertility and fulfilment.

But there is another dimension to Hagar's story, as well, one which I believe many of us could take to heart at the moment, which is this: Sometimes you have to act on hope even when you don't feel it. Hagar was clearly not yet in a hopeful state when she roused herself from her stupor. She did not believe the angel so much as she blindly obeyed his command. But in taking these steps, in acting *as if* hope were warranted, she was able to transform her circumstances.

It's a bit like the song from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, "The King and I": "Whenever I feel afraid …" in which projecting bravado actually brings about self-confidence.

Jeremiah

A second example of Biblical hope is found in the story of Jeremiah. If Hagar resided in a remote, almost mythic past, Jeremiah lived during a documented era of war, a time in which the residents of Jerusalem, where he resided, suffered a crushing defeat after which many were taken from the city in chains. But before the capital's downfall was complete, while the residents of the periphery were still scrambling to salvage whatever assets they could, Jeremiah receives an utterly contrarian instruction from God. Go to your cousin, God commands Jeremiah, and purchase from him your ancestral land. Give him silver, a currency that will carry real value even in your place of exile.

Jeremiah complies, of course, taking from his cousin the deed and burying it in a clay cylinder in the garden. This very act connotes how far-fetched he understands this desperate action to be. His investment is clearly not going to be yielding returns any time in the near future, but he is willing to act – if not on faith, per se, then on the obedient suspension of disbelief. He is willing to concede that what he is able to perceive at the moment may be an incomplete rendering of the Truth.

But to some degree, that is the point. To some degree, an expression of hope under conditions of great adversity will always be a counter-intuitive act, and the results will seldom accrue in the near term. Jeremiah's story encourages us to think of the current state of affairs as a "passing shadow" – admittedly one that may endure for months, years, even a generation or more. However, by positioning our story relative to an inter-generational mission, it transforms what might seem in the moment a decisive defeat into a temporary set-back.

Esther

The final story I would like to reprise with you is that of Queen Esther, a story that has buoyed the hopes of Diaspora Jews for, literally, millennia. Queen Esther, despite her royal title, was also up against quite

dire obstacles. Her entire people faced extermination on a predetermined date set in the not-too-distant future.

Esther allowed herself and her community an interval to come to terms with the significance of their predicament. Indeed, she declared a period of mourning and fasting – effectively an enforced period of grief and despondency. But at the end of that time, Esther took matters into her own hands. She took the unprecedented step of requesting a private audience with the king – a truly *chutzpadik* undertaking that could itself have proven a death sentence – and then used the opportunity that she had carved out to turn the tables on her enemies. Not for nothing, the Purim observance has been linked to Psalm 30, which reads in part: *Ba-erev yalin bechi v'la-boker rinah* ("I go to bed in tears in the evening, but wake to the morning with song").

The take-home message from the Purim story, and from numerous episodes in Jewish history since, is that when the odds seem really stacked against you and the future flickers darkly, it never hurts to put your finger on the scale (i.e., to change the circumstances that are giving rise to despair, rather than addressing the sentiment directly).

This is, perhaps, Judaism's most profound and enduring message of hope: the assertion that free will, human agency, matters and that we have it in our power – collectively, at least – to effect meaningful change.

If this approach sounds a bit familiar, it should, it is the approach that we, as a society (or part of a society), have adopted in relation to our current predicament, putting not only our hopes, but our financial, intellectual, administrative and organizational resources into developing vaccines that would let us neutralize the source of our *tsuris* ("worry" or "despair"). And while this approach has not yet fully born the fruit that we had hoped, I remain convinced – as a medical sociologist and as a rabbi - that this approach will yet prove to be the best way out of our present predicament (though recall, please, my reference to Jeremiah regarding timelines).

On a more personal level, though, the idea of beating back despair by effecting change -- if only at a very local, individual level – is my central message of this season. This is a time of year when we gather, not only to partake of time-honored invocations but also in the belief that through the completion of this exercise and the contemplation that is meant to accompany it, we can – we will – emerge from this undertaking changed for the better.

It is a Jewish belief, asserted in a midrash that likely dates to the earliest centuries of the Common Era, that *teshuvah*, the potential to effect significant and lasting change in one's self and, ultimately, one's world – was a possibility woven into the fabric of the universe even prior to the Creation act itself. How's that for a hopeful message?!?

I would be the first to admit that the Jewish picture of hope that I paint – that our tradition paints – requires a good deal more "sweat equity" than optimism does. But it is also accessible to a far broader audience, a more diverse range of temperaments, under a wider range of circumstances. What is more, you don't have to wait patiently for it to spontaneously "spring up," which is great for people like myself who don't do well waiting inertly for an extended period of time.

So let me take you back to my childhood flirtation with dog-less leashes. At some point in time, during one of my house-cleanings or moves, the red leash that I had purchased for the "dog-that-would-be" disappeared. By that point, it didn't matter. The leash – and the thinking, the actions, the hope that had gone into purchasing it – had worked their magic. They had instilled in me a belief – one might even say, a conviction – that at some point in the future my dream of dog-ownership would be realized, and with that vision firmly established in my mind, my dream became a reality.

Let me add one more coda. I am mindful that there may be some listening this morning for whom a message of hope in this moment falls, if not on deaf ears then on a field too dry to absorb its potentially rejuvenating waters. To you – indeed, to all of us – I say: there is another dimension of Jewish hope, one that I believe has dictated the message's success throughout the years, which is that Jewish hope has never been first or foremost of an individual nature. It has always been based on a collective endeavor in which individuals partook as and when they were able.

If, in this moment, you have found your source of hope, your leash, your lifeline, then by all means bring it into the collective space that others might also seize upon it. And if, at the moment, all you have with you is a desire for hope, then come all the same. We are here for you, and we will carry you with us as we journey together towards brighter times.