

Active Hope

Rosh Hashanah is traditionally understood as the day that God sits in judgment over all of creation. The great medieval scholar Maimonides, in his code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, writes that this “judgment” takes the form of a scale, weighing human transgressions against good deeds. For each person, if our positive deeds outweigh our negative ones, then we come out on the side of merit. Conversely, if the bad outweighs the good, then we are considered among the wicked. And, Maimonides goes on, the same applies to an entire country, and the collective deeds of its citizens. And even more, he says, “In regard to the entire world as well – if all of its inhabitants’ sins were to be greater than their merits, it would immediately be destroyed.” (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:1-3).

Many of us might feel that we're getting dangerously close to Maimonides' prediction. How does humanity measure up, as we enter into the year 5777? On one side of the scale is the onslaught of terrible news that greets us every day. Islamophobia in Florida. Mass slaughter in Syria. Police violence across the U.S. Tens of millions of refugees seeking shelter around the world. Hundreds of millions of people living in abject poverty. Unbreathable air, melting ice caps, political repression, violence against queer people and women – the pile of actions on the “sin” side of the scale can seem infinite.

The other side of the scale tends to get less press. Maybe this is because positive acts, acts of honesty, kindness and compassion, are often less dramatic. But occasionally, every-day acts of merit do make the news. Over the years, I've collected some of these stories.

There's one about Juan Rodriguez, a convenience store owner in New Bedford, who protected a young man who had tried to rob him, when some neighbors who had apprehended the would-be thief were about to beat him up. Rodriguez said, “I ran up to him and used my body to protect his body. I told him that “These people love the store and me, they just want to protect me, and that's why they attacked.””

Or the story about Glen James, a homeless man who found a bag belonging to a foreign exchange student that had over \$2000 cash in it, and promptly gave it to the police. Despite his extreme poverty, James said that the thought of keeping any of the money never crossed his mind. Or the article about Isaura Mendes, who lost two of her sons to violence. In her process of coming to forgive the killer of one of her sons, she started visiting prisons and telling her story to the inmates. She told a reporter, “I am not there to judge them. I'm there to tell them they are loved...I think we forget how important it is to tell people in prison that there is redemption. They can change. We all can change.”

Yet these individual stories, however inspiring, can seem so small in comparison to all that's going wrong. How can they possibly tip the scales in our favor? Given the enormity of the challenges we are facing--as Americans, as global citizens, as denizens of a threatened planet-- it's hard not to give in to pessimism or fear or despair. The upcoming election has become a focal point for these anxieties, for good reason. But the reality is that the problems we face won't be resolved any time soon, regardless of who wins.

So what are we to do, at this challenging time? How do we tip the scales in our favor?

In answering that question, it is helpful to think of the translation of *teshuvah* as “response.” How do we respond wisely and effectively to all the problems we face? What is the response that will lead to a greater accumulation of healing acts, acts of love and justice, and not just pile up more hate and anger on the negative side of the scale?

With thanks to my colleague Rabbi Mordechai Leibling, I recently read a book by the Buddhist scholar and environmental activist Joanna Macy, and her co-author Dr. Chris Johnstone. The book’s title pretty much says it all: *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re In Without Going Crazy.*

The authors begin by defining what they mean by “active hope.” They write,

"Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active hope is about becoming active participants in what we hope for...Active hope is a practice. Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we *do* rather than *have*."

If active hope is something that can be practiced, something that can be fostered and developed, then it does not depend on our particular temperament or on being optimistic or on believing in some Force Out There that is going to make things better. Instead, Macy and Johnstone suggest, “Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life on whose behalf we can act.”

“Active Hope” is really a theory of change, of *teshuvah*, that – like *teshuvah* - involves turning and returning through four types of action, in a kind of spiral.

The first step Macy and Johnstone call “Coming from Gratitude.” Instead of starting with the problem, we start with our own capacity for gratitude. They write, ““Experiencing gratitude is a learnable skill that improves with practice. It isn't dependent on things going well or on receiving favors from others. It's about getting better at spotting what's already there.”

Last week, I taught a lesson to our 4th through 6th graders, the first lesson in a year-long curriculum for developing what I am calling “spiritual resilience.” And what I talked about with our kids was gratitude, and what it means to make a practice of gratitude. I started with gratitude because that’s where Jewish spiritual practice begins. Traditionally, the first words out of our mouth in the morning are “*modah ani, modeh ani*” - “I am grateful.” This blessing gives thanks that our souls have been returned to us, that we have woken up to see another day.

If all of us woke up every day feeling grateful just for being alive, we wouldn’t need to say a prayer. But presumably our rabbinic forebears were a lot like us: they woke up grumpy, or anxious, or weary, or oblivious to the simple gift of being alive. They also had days on which it was a challenge just to get out of bed. So they made it a practice to say a blessing of gratitude every morning.

Macy and Johnstone go on to talk about the beneficial effects of gratitude: that it enhances resilience, promotes emotional wellbeing, builds trust between people. A gratitude practice is a powerful antidote to a consumer culture that constantly tells us what we are lacking. Through the practice of gratitude, we learn what is “enough,” and we learn to see ourselves as dependent upon and connected to other people, and to the earth.

For anyone feeling beaten down by the world, the traditional "*modeh ani*" blessing is a powerful affirmation. It tells us that our being here each morning is an act of love on the part of the universe. The blessing ends with the words *rabbah emunatecha*--"how great is Your faithfulness." That is, how great is Your faith, God, in me, because I must have a purpose, being here on this new day.

And here I'd like to bring in the wisdom of another teacher, the African-American social justice activist and theologian Ruby Sales. Ms. Sales was interviewed on the program "On Being" this past month. In a discussion of her roots in what she calls black folk religion, she attested to the power of this kind of gratitude prayer for those facing the most overwhelming oppression. Here are her words:

"When you really want to understand black folk theology, let me give you an example. Black prayers that our ancestors forged: 'I want to thank you for waking me up in the morning,' which contested the power of the slave master, acknowledging the power of someone greater, that the enslaver was not the alpha and omega of black life. 'I want to thank you for the use of my limbs and the multiplication of my tongue'...'And I want to say, thank you, sir.'" Calling God "sir" was not patriarchal, but it was a way of slapping the enslaver in the face and saying, "You're not my 'sir,' you're not my master." Instead, it bowed down to the altar of God, of something greater than human existence."

So perhaps we can begin to think about gratitude practice as a truly transformative spiritual practice, not just for individuals, but for entire communities. According to the Talmud, we should strive to say one hundred blessings a day. What are we doing when we say a blessing? We are connecting back to the Source – the source of our food; the source of morning and night; the source of love and relationship; the source of teaching and wisdom. Through blessings, we connect to the wisdom of our bodies and the beauty of our souls. Gratitude invites us to take action out of our love for ourselves, our love for the world, and our love for one another.

But we don't stop with gratitude. We need to appreciate all that is beautiful and good, but we also have to acknowledge all that is broken. The next step in the "Active Hope" *teshuvah* spiral is called "Honoring Our Pain." Here we acknowledge and voice our distress, instead of running from it or becoming paralyzed by it. Our heartbreak at the headlines, our anger and despair at the injustice we encounter, our dread about the state of the world—these are normal responses to trauma. If we weren't feeling any distress, we'd either be numb or in denial. In this step of the process, Macy and Johnstone emphasize the importance of expressing our distress, naming our fears, especially in the presence of others. We need to actively grieve for all who are suffering, to grieve for the world.

Ruby Sales says we can begin by asking one another the question, "Where does it hurt?" This is the first step to unlocking our hearts and getting to the depths of our crisis. We need to be witness to one other's pain, in order to understand what lies behind so much of the destructive behavior we see.

This step in the journey is similar to the role of confession in the work of *teshuvah*. In the Al Hayt, the confessional prayer that we recite multiple times during Yom Kippur, we don't just name our own transgressions. We give voice to all of the pain that human beings have caused one another in the year past, from sins of speech to corrupt business practices to violence and oppression and abuse. We say, "We have done evil things"—speaking on behalf of all of humanity.

During the Kol Nidre service we sing, "Rachamana, Compassionate One, who answers the heartbroken, answer us!" We break open our hearts during these Ten Days of Teshuvah, we allow ourselves to really feel our own pain and the pain of the world around us. What Macy and Johnstone point out is that when we open ourselves in this way, we discover a deep sense of interconnection: "Our pain for the world not only alerts us to danger but also reveals our profound caring. And this caring derives from our interconnectedness with all life. We need not fear it." They continue: "Should you fear that with this pain your heart might break, remember that the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe. Your heart is that large. Trust it."

It is a challenge to have that kind of trust. This really is the goal of spiritual and religious practice--not "belief," as some people think, but "trust."

Trust in what? Not in some Cosmic Superhero who is going to swoop in and rescue us. Our challenge is to foster trust in our own capacity for compassion, and to cultivate trust that there is a greater Source of compassion which supports us, which works in us and through us. Throughout this season of *teshuvah*, we are invited to draw on this source of compassion--which we call *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erekh apayim v'rav chesed v'emet...* Adonai, Source of compassion and grace, patience and lovingkindness and truth.

Our capacity for compassion is central to the work of Active Hope. It is accompanied by an awareness of the interconnectedness of all beings. In the third stage in the *teshuvah* spiral, we work to transform our understanding of the world, to come to a deeper appreciation of the ways in which we are connected, and the power that we can derive from that place of connection.

As I read *Active Hope*, I was reminded of this Hasidic story, from Martin Buber's collection, *Tales of the Hasidim*:

A student asked Rabbi Shmelke, "We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. How can I do this, if my neighbor has wronged me?" The rabbi answered: "You must understand these words correctly. Love your neighbor like something which you yourself are. For all souls are one. Each is a spark from the original soul, and this soul is wholly inherent in all souls, just as your soul is in all the parts of your body."

It may come to pass that your hand makes a mistake and strikes you. But would you then take a stick and beat your hand, because it lacked understanding, and so increase your pain? It is the same if your neighbor, who is of one soul with you, wrongs you for lack of understanding. If you punish him, you can only hurt yourself."

In the current state of our world, we really need to take this teaching to heart. It is especially important in this election season, when our need to deal with critical issues has been turned into a kind of sporting event. At a football game, we root for "our side," and success is clear: my team wins, the other loses. When politics turns into sports, there is no room for understanding the other, for seeing his or her pain. We are simply trying to vanquish our opponent. We lose sight of the fact that in the end, all of our destinies on this planet are tied together. There is only one "team." We are like the right hand battering the left hand, leaving our body politic with two bloodied hands, incapable of doing much of anything at all.

In her interview, Ruby Sales speaks very powerfully to this truth. She talks about a spiritual crisis in white America, and how it is affecting all Americans. Here are her words:

"I really think that one of the things that we've got to deal with is, how is it that we develop theologies in a 21st-century capitalist technocracy where only a few lives matter? How do we raise people up from disposability to essentiality?... What is it that public theology can say to the white person in Massachusetts who's heroin-addicted, because they feel that their lives have no meaning? What do you say to someone who has been told that their whole essence is whiteness and power and domination, and when that no longer exists, then they feel as if they are dying or they get caught up in the throes of death, [like] heroin addiction. That's why Donald Trump is essential, because although we don't agree with him, people think he's speaking to that pain that they're feeling. I don't hear anyone speaking to the 45-year-old person in Appalachia, who is dying at a young age, who feels like they've been eradicated because whiteness is so much smaller today than it was yesterday. Where is the theology that redefines to them what it means to be fully human?"

Ms. Sales goes on to say, "I want a theology that begins to deepen people's understanding about their capacity to live fully human lives and to touch the goodness inside of them, rather than call upon the part of themselves that's not relational."

Ms. Sales' words, her theology, very much remind me of what I have learned from my teacher, my friend, my rebbe, the Palestinian nonviolence activist Ali Abu Awwad. Many of you have had the opportunity to hear Ali speak in his recent visits to Boston, and our Israel trip group had the privilege of meeting him at his peace center on the West Bank this summer. Like Ms. Sales, Ali has struggled against injustice and oppression his whole life, as have his parents and grandparents.

His family are refugees from 1948, now living on the West Bank. While working for the Palestinian Authority after the Oslo Accords, Ali was shot and wounded badly by a Jewish

settler; while he was in the hospital getting treatment, he learned that his brother had been killed for no reason by an Israeli soldier.

Ali speaks powerfully about his struggle at that time. His political understanding of the power of nonviolence was at war with the unspeakable grief and pain he felt at the murder of his brother. It was at that time that he met, for the first time, Israeli families who had lost loved ones in the conflict, and in the midst of his own grief, he got a glimpse of the humanity of the other "side." At that point in his life Ali made a very conscious choice to reject hate, to reject violence, because he realized that those were not the keys to his liberation. [*You can see Ali's TedX talk [here](#).*]

Ali has written a book that also has the word "hope" in the title; he calls it "Painful Hope." I haven't had the chance to ask Ali about that title, but I think it's his way of talking about what Macy and Johnstone call "Active Hope." It's the hope that stems from an ability to hold onto a vision of a different kind of world. It's a hope that takes seriously the problems we face, and seeks a solution from the heart of the conflict. For Ali, the path of nonviolence is critical to his vision, because, as he says, "for me, nonviolence is about the art of being human. It is the celebration of my existence. It is about refusing to be a victim."

His words echo these of Ruby Sales: "When you look at black spirituals, you hear a theology and a philosophy of nonviolence, and that was an essential part of black folk religion...It was a religion predicated on right relations and love and nonviolence...That's the meaning of the song "I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart. And you can't make me hate you. And you can't make me hate you in my heart." Now, that's very powerful because you have to understand that this spiritual — it was an acknowledgement not only that we control our internal lives, but also it contested the notion of the omnipotent power of the white enslaver. That was very revolutionary and very profound."

Ms. Sales goes on to talk about the power of both anger and love in the work of transformation. She says, "love is not antithetical to being outraged." She speaks of "redemptive anger," the kind that moves us to "transformation and human up-building," in contrast to the kind of anger that feeds white supremacy. Let me share a few more of her words:

"I became involved in the Southern Freedom Movement, not merely because I was angry about injustice, but because I love the idea of justice. So it's where you begin your conversation. Most people begin their conversation with "I hate this" — but they never talk about what it is they love. And so I think that we have to begin to have a conversation that incorporates a vision of love with a vision of outrage. And I don't see those things as being over and against each other. You can't talk about injustice without talking about suffering. But the reason why I want to have justice is because I love everybody in my heart. And if I didn't have that feeling, that sense, then there would be no struggle."

Both Ali Abu Awwad and Ruby Sales uses the word "vision" - and this is the fourth stage in the "Active Hope" spiral, in the messianic work of *teshuvah*. We cannot get trapped by the

limitations of the world today, by the stunted vocabulary of our politics and the dominant culture. We need a vision of where we are trying to get to. An inspiring vision that can motivate us and sustain us, especially when reality looks bleak.

For Ali, that vision is peace--in his words, "a place where two truths - the Jewish truth and the Palestinian truth - can fit together in one place." For Macy and Johnstone, it's a vision of a sustainable world, an economic and social order that does not depend on the exploitation of people or the planet. For Ruby Sales, it is the vision of a healthy and vibrant America free of racial oppression, in which all citizens are liberated from hate and violence.

It's hard to hold onto a transformative vision. It much easier to believe that reality can't be much different than what it is today. One of the tasks of "active hope" is to have the willingness to dream, and to activate our imaginations in the service of that dream. Macy and Johnstone encourage us to embrace uncertainty in this visioning process: "When we know the future isn't yet decided, there is room for us to play a role in influencing what happens...Neither complacent optimism nor resigned pessimism has the power to motivate us; they don't generate a hunger for learning or provoke our best response."

Our best response--*teshuvah*. A response that comes from a place of compassion and wisdom. A response that dares to challenge the prevailing notions of what is possible. A response that is rooted in gratitude, in appreciation for ourselves and all those around us. A response that honors the holy spark within every human being, and indeed within every creature on this planet.

Our *teshuvah* work will overwhelm us if it is not grounded in community. These High Holydays services are a model for us. We each have individual work to do within ourselves, but we come together in community to do it. We need community for safety and support, and also for learning and self-critique. And when we do go out into the world, we need community as refuge, community as a place to recharge our mental and spiritual batteries, community as a place to build our power.

Our congregation is one model of transformative community, a place where we get to live out a communitarian ethos in a radically individualistic society. It is a place where we learn to take on mutual obligation, to show up for people we might not even know. We learn to have arguments *l'shem shamayim*--"for the sake of heaven"--debate not for the sake of winning, not for the sake of vanquishing my opponent, but for the sake of reaching a higher truth.

It's relatively easy, in 21st century America, to take refuge in smaller and smaller circles of people who think exactly like us. And while some of you might imagine that Dorshei Tzedek is one of those circles, it's actually not. We have members from an array of backgrounds, with a variety of opinions, of approaches, on all kinds of issues, and I think that is a blessing. I fear group action when it is based on wholehearted agreement--this is what a mob looks like. We need community to be the place where we think critically together, where we lovingly challenge one another, where we seek solutions to our deepest

problems by embracing our differences and welcoming the unique gifts we each bring to this work.

I hope we can be a community where we take on serious spiritual practice together: the practice of blessing, of gratitude; the practice of compassion, for ourselves and others; the practice of seeing the *tzelem elohim*, the Godly spark, in every human being, even those with whom we profoundly disagree.

Whether it's undoing racism, engaging with Israel and Palestine, working to halt climate change, transforming the criminal justice system, or learning how to best support and celebrate one another, I hope we can be inspired this year by this idea of "active hope," of *teshuvah* in its deepest and truest sense.

When we feel overwhelmed by the divisiveness and violence and ugliness we see, we can take refuge in the practice of gratitude. When we feel alone in our pain and our anger, we can reach out and find others who will share that pain with us. When we feel paralyzed by the barrage of information coming our way, we can step back and remember the vision, the view of the promised land that we're trying to reach. May we all be blessed, in this new year, to see a world transformed.

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