Captives of Hope
Rosh HaShanah Morning 5781 – September 19, 2020
Rabbi Meredith Kahan – Rockdale Temple

Rosh HaShanah is all about newness, renewal, rebirth. Rosh HaShanah is promise and opportunity. It’s wearing new clothes for the first time, stepping out into the crisp fall air, and greeting family and friends with a feeling of hope and possibility. It’s hearing the call of the shofar and feeling inspired to do something to better yourself, your community, or the world. Rosh HaShanah is a celebration of life. It’s round challah and apples and honey. Rosh HaShanah is sweet.

Usually. But let’s be honest. This Rosh HaShanah doesn’t feel so sweet. It doesn’t feel promising or full of possibility. You might not feel inspired or celebratory or hopeful. Instead, you might feel empty. Rosh HaShanah might feel lacking. This year, the arrival of Rosh HaShanah and these High Holy Days smacks of loss.

The losses of this past year are almost too overwhelming to recount. First, we lost the comforts of everyday life. When coronavirus hit, we locked down. Schools closed, offices shuttered, we weren’t able to go into stores or out to dinner or to the movies.

Many adults lost work hours or even their jobs. Some had to close businesses they had worked hard to build. Others had to make tough choices to lay others off. With these came a loss of income, a loss of health insurance, and perhaps a loss of a sense of purpose. There are those in our communities, our cities, and our country who have become homeless or hungry as a result of this pandemic. And of course, there has been the staggering loss of human life.

At the same time, kids lost months of their school year. That meant losing peer interaction, space to play and explore, and connections with teachers. Many also lost the ability to meaningfully learn, meals that filled their bellies, and physical and emotional
safety and security. High school and college seniors, and any students at a transition, lost their graduation ceremonies, parties and often, the chance to find closure and say goodbye.

These challenges extended into summer, as kids lost their camp experiences and parents lost childcare, and into this new school year, as so many of our students lost the ability to begin classes in person with their teachers and friends.

Still others, who live alone, have a wholly different set of challenges – loneliness, lack of touch and contact, boredom and isolation. Many have lost the ability to safely travel to loved ones and friends. We have lost the opportunity to hug our adult children and grandchildren – many of us have lost the opportunity of any human touch at all. Some celebrated at the birth of a grandchild, only to not be able to hold that baby – and some celebrated the birth of their own new baby, without their parents able to help out, hug them, or even be present. We have missed our children’s milestones – first days of kindergarten, graduations, performances, college visits. We have had to postpone Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and weddings, some more than once, many for more than a full year. We’ve had to mourn our loved ones – our own parents, in some cases, over an internet connection – unable to bury them in person or even be with them in their final days. All of us have sustained very personal losses in this time.

Just six weeks into the pandemic, Passover arrived. When we first locked down here in Ohio, we assumed we’d be back together by Passover. And yet, we ended up celebrating in Zoom rooms instead of dining rooms, via virtual reality instead of the reality of hugs and visits. Passover is the holiday most universally celebrated by American Jews, and there we were, some trying to lead *sedarim* when we’d never led before, others attempting a seder plate without physically entering the grocery store, all
of us trying to enjoy the Festival of Freedom without the freedom to be together with our
loved ones and community.

There’s a real sense of loss around the High Holy Days this year. We’re not
physically sitting together. You didn’t get to walk down that long hallway to the sounds
of our greeters wishing you a Shanah Tovah. There is no leaning over chairs to shake the
hand of that fellow member you always seem to sit by. We aren’t hearing our musicians
sing together, nor hearing the horns lead Kedusha. There will be no Rosh HaShanah
reception with lovingly baked desserts, nor communal break-the-fast where we all
breathe a sigh of relief at the end of the holy day. We are missing that feeling of sacred
congregation, the feeling you get when you pray with others. These High Holy Days,
however special and meaningful in their own right, are different and they are full of loss.

Of course, these past months have brought significant national losses, as well.
200,000 human beings have died from the novel coronavirus, people of every age and
every stage of life. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and
so many others, along with the shooting of Jacob Blake, have reignited our awareness of
racial injustice and the ongoing losses the Black community must suffer. We may have
lost hope in our country, in our fellow citizens, in our government, in our leadership, as
we grapple with these twin crises.

All of America feels many of these losses. But our congregation faced another loss
this year, a loss so great, and heavy, and tragic. Our beloved Senior Rabbi of sixteen
years, Sissy Coran, died on May 8th. Though she had bravely battled breast cancer for
several years, we were shocked by her sudden death. In the blink of an eye, it seems, she
was gone from this world and from our lives. We lost her friendship, her wisdom, her
counsel, her leadership. And because her death occurred during the COVID-19
pandemic, we couldn’t come together in person to mourn her. We lost the ability to hug and comfort one another. We lost the chance to come to our sacred space, here at Rockdale, to pray, to say Kaddish, to remember her.

This has been a year of tremendous loss. We have been grieving for six full months. Jewish tradition offers us the frameworks of shiva – an intensive first week of mourning, shloshim – a month of concentrated grieving, and yartzeit – a yearly marking of remembrance, in order to guide our process. Judaism understands that we can’t sit in loss and grief long-term – we must have a way to slowly raise ourselves up, to find comfort, and eventually heal, all while never forgetting what we’ve lost. Unfortunately, during this strange time, many of these processes have been truncated or missed almost entirely. Most of us are dealing with delayed grief. We may have not fully dealt with our losses.

If our grief has been delayed, if we have not been able to fully embrace our mourning rituals, if the losses just keep coming, how can we possibly lift ourselves out of this? How do we keep from becoming prisoners of our grief?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, looks at the whole of Jewish tradition, our texts and laws, our rituals and prayers, and teaches that they are “designed to create in people, families, communities and a nation, habits that defeat despair. Judaism is the voice of hope in the conversation of [human]kind.”1 Our tradition insists that we not ever become prisoners of our grief. We always allow the wedding procession to precede the funeral procession. We abstain from wearing our

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1 Jonathan Sacks, “How the Jewish People Invented Hope” https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-the-jewish-people-invented-hope/?fbclid=IwAR0C7A2c3oX12aT8b6vblwPPTJJksUjlr_mi6UV7-E6XtqM_PYtlJKDogTk)
torn, black, *k’riah* ribbons on Shabbat when we’re sitting *shiva*. We are taught that “those who sow in tears will reap in joy.”\(^2\) Even in the most challenging of times, we Jews have always been a people of hope.

The prophet Zechariah so believed this that he coined the phrase *asirei hatikvah*, captives or prisoners of hope. In calling the people *asirei hatikvah*, Zechariah asserted that we are a people who are **required** to hope.\(^3\) Rabbi Reuven Hammer teaches that “hope may indeed be the key to Jewish survival [...] it must have taken a great deal of strength to keep alive the hope of survival and redemption during the many times of darkness in Jewish history, ancient and modern.”\(^4\) The national anthem of the modern State of Israel is, as we know, called *HaTikvah* – The Hope; the Jewish people has always yearned to be free in a land of our own, and, following the unprecedented, enormous losses of the Holocaust, that dream came true. In the 27\(^{th}\) Psalm, traditionally recited daily in the month of Elul leading up to Rosh HaShanah, the Psalmist cries out, “Hope in the Eternal! Be strong and strengthen your heart and hope in God!” Rabbi Yael Levy, writing creative liturgy for the High Holy Days, translates the end of the Psalm this way:

> I must have faith that I can see through all of this
> I can see the good, the blessings, the ways of life.
> Cultivate hope in the Infinite Presence.
> Let your heart be strong and filled with courage.
> Cultivate hope.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Psalm 126:5
\(^3\) Zechariah 9:12
\(^5\) Levy on Psalm 27, in Reconstructing Judaism’s HHD liturgy 2020 (RH am)
Hope is central to what it means to be Jewish, though Rabbi Sacks is careful to explain that there is a difference between hope and optimism. In his book, To Heal a Fractured World, he writes that “Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a passive value, hope an active one. It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope.”

We can’t – and shouldn’t – look at our lives and our world as they are today and commit to being optimists. Life is difficult right now. We have sustained so many losses – of loved ones, of traditions and milestones, of trust, of daily life. Blindly wishing and waiting for things to change will not change our reality. But we are, as our tradition reminds us, asirei hatikvah, captives of hope. We are a people required to hope. And having hope means that we can work for something better. We cannot wish away coronavirus, we will not magically end pain or suffering or the deaths of our loved ones, we cannot cure injustice or cruelty by sheer force of will. But we also cannot just accept our losses and sit forever in our grief. As Rabbi Sacks notes, “hope and tragedy do not differ about facts but about interpretation and expectation. They make a moral difference. Those who hope, strive. Those who are disillusioned, accept. In that respect, they are self-fulfilling prophecies. A morality of hope lives in the belief that we can change the world for the better…”

The great American essayist, intellectual, and poet Adrienne Rich, asked,

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6 Sacks, To Heal a Fractured World, 165-166.
7 Ibid.
What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other’s despair into hope? —
You yourself must change it. —
what would it feel like to know
your country was changing? —
You yourself must change it. —
Though your life felt arduous
new and unmapped and strange
what would it mean to stand on the first
page of the end of despair?⁸

In her poem, Rich is not asking us to ignore the difficulties, losses, or challenges of our lives; rather, she is imploring us to be captives of hope, people who are obligated to work for something better. She is asking us to recognize and name our losses, do the hard work of grieving, and then rise from the depths and take one step forward. Judaism demands the same from us. We are not prisoners of grief, no matter how many losses we have faced. We are captives of hope - individuals, families, and a community who can – and will – sustain loss, process our grief, and go forth to life.

The Jewish people has faced significant loss before, many individuals have sustained great loss before, and yet, this past year has been unprecedented for our community. Our losses have been truly enormous: loss of work and school, loss of safety

⁸ Rich, “Dream Before Waking”
and security, loss of health and wellness, loss of trust, loss of leadership, loss of relationships, loss of touch and comfort... loss of neighbors and friends, loss of beloved family members, the loss of our cherished Rabbi Coran. We cannot and should not pretend that we have not lost a great deal. We cannot and should not stop grieving, processing, and crying out. But we also cannot and should not stop hoping. We need to hope. We need “a hope that leads to action, not to stagnation; a hope that enable us to survive at times of darkness and despair and that leads to the attainment of freedom, peace and [social justice].”

If we can bring ourselves to hope on this Rosh HaShanah, we can begin to work for healing, for justice, for wholeness. If we can bring ourselves to hope on this Rosh HaShanah, we can find the promise, the opportunity, the possibility that still exists. If we can bring ourselves to hope on this Rosh HaShanah, we can be inspired. If we can bring ourselves to hope on this Rosh HaShanah, we can find a way to celebrate life – in all its complexity, in all its heartbreak, and yes, in all its sweetness.

For this we hope, for this we pray, and for this we act.

9 Hammer, “Prisoners of Hope”