

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5782
Faith, Hope, and Gratitude
Rabbi Micah J. Citrin

I experienced a profound moment this summer when I was teaching at Jewish summer camp. It occurred during a discussion with a bunk of high school girls leading up to the commemoration of *Tisha B'Av*. *Tisha B'Av* is the all-encompassing commemoration of sadness in the Jewish calendar, mourning periods of destruction, loss, and exile in our people's history. I set the stage for the discussion by asking, "What is it that helps you cope during a time of crisis? What is it that helps you to get through?" Many answers I expected – "I talk to friends...I go to my room....I listen to music...I cry." Their counselor's answer pierced my heart. A young woman of no more than 19 or 20 said that she feels despair when she looks at our world – climate devastation, a pandemic, the January 6th riot, racism. Overwhelmed, she could not identify anything that could make her feel better. In the moment, I did not have a good response, an answer that could help her overcome this feeling of despondence. All I could do was empathize with her sense of helplessness.

I think that many of us can. This year has been more than many of us can bear. Where will find strength? Last night, Rabbi Karen spoke of the blessing *Shehecheyanu* – thanking God for simply being alive. And in the blessing is a question, what is it that enables us to fully live, especially when life overwhelms us. What follows is my response to that counselor's search for stability in a shaky, broken world. Three fundamental values of Jewish tradition - faith, hope and gratitude - serve as pillars for me, enabling me to live. I want to share these lessons with you as this New Year begins.

Jewish tradition embraces faith as an essential part of living. Faith is one of those words that may make us uncomfortable. Faith can sound too religious, dripping with born-again fervor. Faith, is rooted in belief and belief usually exists without tangible proof. As Reform Jews, we often think that our tradition privileges action over faith. Do tzedakah. Care for the down-trodden. Speak out against injustice. But faith is just as important, it is the fertile ground where we cultivate and grow our action. Faith is a hard idea to define. I like to think of it as a knowing beyond knowing. It is not lack of reason, but the crossroads of reason, intuition and spiritual connection. Faith is the knowing that occurs from the inside when we have quieted our minds and stilled our thoughts enough to hear the Still, Small, Voice of God, constantly murmuring that we are part of this life, this creation. Faith reminds us that no matter what may happen, we are not alone. Faith assures us that we have aquifers of strength deep beneath the surface.

Our Torah portion this morning, the *Akeda*, embodies faith. Out of the blue, God decides to test Abraham. It seems like those are the only tests in life, the ones that interrupt us when we least expect it. "Take your son, the one you love, Isaac, and raise him as an *olah*, a burnt offering," God commands (Genesis 22:2). What God asks of Abraham is beyond comprehension. It is earth shattering. Yet, Abraham prepares his provisions and he goes. At each step along the way, he demonstrates faith that his world will not be upended, that parents sacrificing children is not what God asks of us. When Abraham, Isaac and the servants arrive at the mountain after three days' travel, Abraham says, "We will worship and we will return to you," knowing that somehow they will come back together. Along the trail when Isaac looks at

his father and says, “My father, here is fire and wood, where is the sheep for the offering?” Abraham responds, with faith, “God will see to the burnt offering, my son.” And even in the last moment, when Isaac is bound and Abraham lifts the knife above his head, Abraham maintains his faith, not zealotry to perform an unthinking, unthinkable act. His faith is quiet and steady enough to hear the angel whisper in his ear, that there is another way, another option. Abraham’s world does not have to be like this. So in his faith Abraham has vision enough to see the ram caught in the thicket, whom he offers to God in place of Isaac. Abraham passed the test, not because he had blind faith, rather because he could sense the unwavering presence and goodness of God leading him to a different outcome.

In Judaism, faith or *Emunah* is not a lightning bolt experience. *Emunah* has the Hebrew root *alef, mem, nun*. Other words that contain this same Hebrew root include *omanut*, art, *hitamnut* exercise, and *amen*, what we say in response to a blessing meaning, “yes, I agree.” *Emunah*, faith, is an artful way of living. It can come only from practice. Think of this place as your art studio or your gym for *Emunah*. Synagogue participation can train your mind and soul for a practice of faith. And when we live with faith, we can say *Amen* to whatever comes our way, yes, I can deal with this, yes, I am not alone, I have the support of family friends and community. Yes, God is with me. Faith does not erase doubts, it just helps us absorb doubt so that doubt does not consume us.

If we can tap into reservoirs of faith, then there must be hope. One of the members of my family who teaches me most about hope is our dog, Idgy. Each morning when I come down stairs, Idgy is fast asleep on his bed. He does not so much as bat an eyelash at me. But the moment I open the refrigerator to make breakfast, his head pops up. He sees me take out the eggs and some cheese, as I start to prepare my meal. He comes and sits patiently next to me, looking at me with his deep brown eyes, wells of kindness as deep as any ocean. I would not say that he is begging. He is just sure that this is morning he is going to get that piece of cheese or that bite of eggs. It does not matter how many mornings he sits, waits, and does not receive (we don’t want to start any bad habits, after all), yet each new day brings a certitude that this could be the day all his hopes and dreams are realized. And from time to time, he is right. Maybe I can follow Idgy’s lead and doggedly pursue hope.

Living with hope is a Jewish value. The Jewish people would not exist without hope. Hope is what our people took with us into our years of wandering when we were homeless, 2,000 years of exile from the land of our People’s birth. Before, *Hatikvah*, “The Hope,” became that national anthem of the State of Israel, it was the national anthem of the Jewish people. When it was written in 1878, its author Naftali Herz Imber and all those who sang it with full throat had no notion of when this hope would be realized, but they sang it anyway. Hope means holding on to dreams. Hope is holding on the possibility that things can change. Hope is at the heart of the holiday season, for if there would be no hope, we would be hopeless. Our *teshuvah*, our work to return to our best selves, would be meaningless for we be beyond redemption.

Whenever we return the Torah to the ark and especially on Yom Kippur, we declare, *Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v’nashuva. Chadeish yameinu k’kedem* – Return us to You, God, and we will return. Renew our days as of old. (Lam. 5:21)” *Chadeish* – renew, like spring after winter when you think it will never be warm again and that trees will forever be a barren army of

skeletal branches. Hope resides in the buds that just start to peak out, the promise that change is possible. We look to our children and we see hope. We look to our children as generations before have and know that for their sake, the world as it is, is not how it ought to be – that we must change. We draw hope from those who came before us determined to overcome and fix what was broken. That same hope can sustain us through the pandemics that face our world today, from the Coronavirus to climate change, as long as this hope is rooted in our will do things differently. Hope is a radical act of will, clinging to the promise things can be better, and then going out and making them better – like when scientists work tirelessly to create vaccines that can save lives, when as individuals we take one step and then another toward more sustainable, climate friendly living, when societies make choices to preserve wild lands and forests, and embrace policies bringing new energy to problems that seem beyond repair. Hope has always been the mechanism that bends the arc of history towards *tzedek*, righteousness. I hope today can be a day of change. I hope.

If faith steadies us and hope lifts our spirit, then living with gratitude helps us to see the goodness that already surrounds us. One of my favorite Rabbis from the Talmud was a man named Nachum Ish Gamzu. He got his name from his manner in this world – his attitude of gratitude. No matter what Nachum encountered in his life, he would say, “*Gam zu l'tovah* – This too is for good.” Once, the Jews of Israel wanted to send the Roman Emperor a gift. They deliberated upon who they should send as their messenger and settled on Nachum Ish Gamzu, because miracles always seemed to happen to him. Nachum took the small chest of jewels and pearls on his journey. Along the way, he spent the night in an inn and while he slept the innkeepers took everything in his chest and filled it with dirt. When Nachum reached the Emperor he opened the chest, what was supposed to be a great gift. Instead, the Emperor found a chest filled with earth. The Emperor was outraged at the insult and sentenced Nachum to death. Nachum Ish Gamzu replied, “*Gamzu l'tovah* – this too is for good.” At that moment, Elijah the Prophet appeared disguised as a Roman general. He said to the Emperor, perhaps this is the same kind of earth the Jews’ ancestor Abraham used to defeat his enemies, dirt that when thrown would turn into swords and spears. The Emperor took the dirt into battle against an especially formidable foe and promptly won the battle. Nachum Ish Gamzu was rewarded for this great gift and rather than death, he gained life.

For all intents and purposes, Nachum Ish Gamzu had nothing to be grateful for. He was swindled, his life was threatened, and he seemingly had no way out. Even in this dark situation, Nachum identified the good. Whenever we are able to unearth even a grain of good, we unleash the power of gratitude. Sometimes, life seems to deliver to us a chest filled with dirt, it is cruddy all around. And yet, it can be a simple, radical act of finding something in an experience to be thankful for that changes our attitudes leading to new insights. Gratitude is our greatest weapon against suffering. Gratitude helps us set aside what we think we want, or what we can’t have, and simply accept what is. For Nachum Ish Gamzu, the miracle was not that the dirt was magic. This story teaches us that gratitude is magic. Even in moments of hardship, giving thanks helps us to look at our situation in a different light. We appreciate more what we have had in easier times, we uncover the lessons of resilience, the opportunity to learn, the gift of being support when we are most vulnerable. Gratitude opens us to the possibility that good exists wherever we go, even if we have to go digging for it.

This New Year season, I think we all need a little more faith, hope, and gratitude. I want that for each of us, and for the young counselor whose spirit has been crushed by the state of our world. I will conclude with one more lesson camp taught me this summer. It comes in the form a song I learned from some Hebrew College rabbinical students with whom we taught. It reminds me that if we start with a blessing of gratitude for each moment in our lives, we can be filled with hope, a sense of optimism for what is possible, and that hope will root us in an abiding faith, *Emunah*, to which we can say *amen*, yes – let it be so.