

**Reaching Beyond Our Despair**  
Rosh HaShanah, First Day 5782/2021  
Rabbi Ita Paskind  
Congregation Beth El Norwalk

A few weeks ago, I posted a question on my Facebook page: On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, what message would YOU want to hear from your rabbi? What would you NOT want to hear? And I got all the expected responses--nothing political, nothing about Israel, nothing about the pandemic...

The response that touched me the most was a private reply from a friend--a mom with 2 young children, each a year younger than my daughters--who asked this:

**How can we have faith that we aren't bequeathing to our children a world spiraling out of control?**

**How can we have faith that they won't feel the same despair we do?**

Her questions speak poignantly to the unraveling we're seeing around us, yes, but also to the emotional toll these events have on our hearts.

We're supposed to be celebrating a new year today, but that means nothing if we can't acknowledge the difficulty--no, the trauma--of the last year. So I'll do what any therapist would recommend: I'll name it.

Since we gathered virtually last year, we've gone through a particularly rancorous presidential election; we've seen the center of our democracy attacked, another terrible season of missile attacks and painful retaliation in Israel, the takeover of an entire nation by a militant organization... not to mention natural disasters the world over, the continuing devastating effects of climate change, and, you know, a mutant pandemic virus. We've seen illness and death like never before, and many of us have been personally affected. We've experienced more disconnectedness than ever before in our lifetimes. Our nation is so divided over politics that we'd rather defriend someone who doesn't see eye to eye than deal with their perspective, or worse, their attacks on our own public statements. Our society continues to struggle with racism, homophobia, sexism, and all the other -isms we thought we'd have worked through by now. And amid all of that filling our minds and hearts, each of us has our own personal or familial challenges. Friends, it's a lot. You're tired. And so am I.

It would be easy, and completely understandable, to float aimlessly through this sacred day--just another day of masking and distancing, of dealing with personal heartache and

despair at the world around us. It would be even easier to just skip it. But you're here. And you know I'm not gonna let us do that.

Perhaps the most important thing to remind ourselves in moments of true despair--if we can--is that we are in the middle of a very long haul. To borrow some metaphors from the recent Olympics: we're running the marathon, not the 100m sprint; we're pacing ourselves for the open-water marathon swim, not the 400m individual medley; we're climbing Mount Fuji in the cycling road race, not competing in the short-track event.

We simply cannot allow today's headlines to dictate our outlook for the coming year.

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, a rabbi, poet, chaplain, and blogger in the Renewal Movement of Judaism, suggests<sup>1</sup> that "our task is to cultivate the ability to look beyond our own despair".

We need look no further than our Torah reading this morning for inspiration.

As we know from returning to this text year after year, the Torah recalls the complex family life of Abraham--the love of his life, Sarah, and their son, Isaac; but also Hagar, his Egyptian handmaid who bore their son Yishmael, at Sarah's own request. In our reading, Sarah, raging with jealousy, demands that Abraham banish Hagar and Yishmael from their home. You can imagine: a single mother with her young son, a single skin of water, and a single loaf of bread. They won't last long under the blazing desert sun. She places her baby underneath the shade of a bush, and then collapses... there's no way her baby will survive this plight. I can't think of a more hopeless situation than that.

At that very moment, an angel of God--*mal'ach Adonai*--calls to Hagar and tells her not to fear, God has heeded the boy's cry, and he will become the father of a great nation. The angel reveals a well of water, literally a lifeline for mother and son in the sweltering heat.

That angel had a full calendar. It also appears to Abraham as his arm is poised to sacrifice his *other* only son, Isaac, in tomorrow's reading--saving Isaac's life, saving Abraham from doing the unthinkable, and granting the eternal gift of the ram's horn, the shofar, on this day.

But it's not only angels who are capable of turning around a hopeless situation. Abraham himself challenged God to spare the cities of Sodom and Amorah for the sake of the righteous few, and Moses reasoned with God to spare the entire people of Israel after the sin of the Golden Calf. Miriam followed her baby brother's basket to ensure he maintained a connection with his family of origin.

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<https://www.jewishexponent.com/2021/08/16/rabbis-are-supposed-to-offer-hope-on-the-high-holidays-what-if-i-cant/>

Even God Godself redeems a hopeless situation early on in biblical history: human beings aren't living up to God's expectations--really, it's worse than that: "they engage in evil all day long", *rak ra kol hayom*--and the consequence is a global flood. God intends a do-over, starting from Noah and his family, and of course the animals, 2 by 2. What I find so compelling about this narrative is the part *after* the flood waters recede and God realizes that it was a mistake to wipe out so much precious life: God vows: "I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.""

In each of these seemingly hopeless situations, someone steps in, someone steps up to bring tikkun, repair.

Wouldn't it be incredible if an angel were to call out to us today, or God Godself intervene, to bring tikkun to our olam, our world. But you know, friends, it's also regular human beings--Abraham, Moshe, Linda, David, Ita, Mike, Cindy, or Joe--who have the potential *l'taken et ha'olam*, to bring much-needed repair to our world. And it's this repair--even in the most miniscule doses--that can help us to see beyond our own despair.

I want to offer 3 tangible, achievable ideas today.

First, start by identifying where you despair. Search your heart for the places where you feel the most angst, the most existential pain--**and then look for a way to help**. Are you worried about climate change? The rights of immigrants? The rise of anti-semitism? Species extinction? The constant revelations of sexual misconduct and harassment? Persistent and systemic racism? Hunger? The upcoming influx of Afghani refugees to our country? It bears reiterating that there are groups and organizations already working tirelessly on each of these critical issues, and they would welcome *your* voice, *your* passion, *your* time, and of course your tzedakah too. Yes, you'll be bringing some tikkun to the world; you'll also literally be reaching beyond your own despair.

Second, identify what lifts you up, what ignites your passion--**and then do more of that. Bring others along with you. Just put more joy into the world.** You may not be repairing anything broken, but you'll be tipping the balance toward joy, toward good, toward connection, toward mitzvah.

And with my last offering today, I return to that original question about the world we will leave to the next generation. This year, friends, **let us focus on that next generation, on children, plain and simple.** This year, find a way to use *your* skills, *your* compassion, *your* thoughtfulness, and *your* knowledge to connect with children. It is up to us to do our part

in preparing them for the challenges ahead. If you have children or grandchildren, nieces or nephews, cousins--well, you've got your opportunities right in front of you. But we need not limit our connection with the next generation to our relatives, difficult as branching out is during COVID. Volunteer to read with kids, to play sports with them, to help them read Hebrew or strengthen their Jewish identities, or wherever you want to invest your energy. Let this be the year we give our gifts to those who will one day appreciate them.

In each of these ways--working to repair the brokenness, putting more joy into the world, and connecting with children--we can do our part to bring healing, to bring positivity to our world, to see, laser-focused, beyond our own despair. As Rabbi Barenblat put it in her article: "We just have to be like those biblical angels for each other: helping each other see the hope we can't find alone."

This is our invitation into this new year. Welcome 5782, תשפ"ב. We are ready, together. Shanah Tovah, my friends.