

Doing Hope
Rosh HaShanah 5779
Tuesday, September 11, 2018
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Today, Rosh HaShanah, is the birthday of the world--HaYom Harat Olam.

Today we return to the foundations of our tradition and to the foundations of our lives. Birth serves as a reminder of the endless potential we have as individuals, and Rosh HaShanah recalls the endless potential we have as part of humanity and the Jewish people.

While we are here to celebrate, we also must acknowledge the struggles we have experienced since we last gathered here. Whether it's an illness or the loss of a loved one, disappointments at work or with family, or deep sadness at the problems that we see in our country and in our world... today we yearn not just for glimmers of hope, but for bright, attainable hope.

We're spending a lot of time in shul yesterday, today, and next week. Some of us may even attend a few extra services in between. While the words are the same as last year and the year before, *we* are different each year. Our world is new and different; we have different concerns. And so, we have an opportunity, and I hope that each of us grabs it and runs with it. While we are here, each of us has the chance to contemplate a vision for our lives, our community, our country and our world. You can consider what you will do to bring that vision to life. Build up your hopes--not in the naive sense, but in a very real way, for this coming year.

2 examples:

Candy Chang of New Orleans had recently experienced the sudden loss of a mother-figure in her life and was in desperate need of some positivity. She'd thought a lot about the impact death has on the way we live our lives--making us live more urgently, more fully--and she wanted to instill a sense of hope in herself and in others while there was plenty of time. Taking advantage of an abandoned building in her neighborhood, she stenciled in really big letters on one of its outside walls a fill-in-the-blank sentence: "Before I die, I want to (fill in the blank) ____" and she left plenty of chalk. The response? In just 1 day, the wall was full. Here are a few ways people filled in the sentence. "Before I die, I want to make a livable wage." "Before I die, I want to plant a tree." "Before I die, I want to see equality." "Before I die, I want to have a student come back and tell me it mattered." and "Before I die, I want to see the change I've been in the world." And that was just in New Orleans. Chang has since partnered with civic centers around the world, transforming walls and buildings like this where people are giving voice--in chalk--to their deepest hopes. You can see pictures of Chang's project and hear her speak about it in her TED talk¹.

While the project itself is very cool, I have to say that I am most struck by the reverence people have when approaching this activity. The project transforms the simple act of writing with sidewalk chalk into a sacred activity--a ritual, if you will. It requires thought, it requires checking in with

¹ <https://ideas.ted.com/how-to-be-more-hopeful/>

one's heart and soul, it demands a little courage to put it out there in a public space.

And perhaps the very act of articulating one's hopes enables a person to begin to realize them.

Second example.

2 summers ago, in Omaha, Nebraska, Rabbi Steve Abraham was watching the local news. His ears perked up when he heard Lacey Studnicka, Program Development Officer at Lutheran Family Services, the largest refugee resettlement organization in the state, speaking with a reporter to encourage local congregations to sponsor a refugee family. Excited at the possibility that he might be able to fulfill the mitzvah of welcoming the stranger, Rabbi Abraham brought the idea to his synagogue board, and one of the board members immediately volunteered to chair the campaign. The rest was history, and it moved fast. Rabbi Abraham sent an email blast to the congregation, and within 2 weeks, 60 individuals had volunteered. 4 congregants stepped up to chair the committees. They began collecting clothing, kitchen items, furniture, and monetary contributions.

The call came just 1 week later: Could they be ready in 20 more days for a Syrian couple with 5 small children? Absolutely. The donations poured in from shul members and the wider community, and on September 19, a delegation from the synagogue met the family at the airport. There were hugs, there were tears, there was Syrian food donated by a local restaurant, and by that evening, there were American Jewish kids and little Syrian kids playing

together. The congregation continued to act as the primary support for the family for the first 90 days, and then transitioned into a mentoring role.

Rabbi Abraham and his congregants recall that day with the deepest emotion. Not only did the Jewish community of Omaha fulfill the mitzvah of welcoming the stranger; they were able to harness the passion and energy they remembered from welcoming Russian Jews a generation ago into this new era. They gave these 7 souls a shot at a new life. They gave them hope.

Like Ms. Chang, like Rabbi Abraham, I'm talking about hope in the active sense of the word. Hope as an optimistic stance in life. Hope as the internal motivation to make some positive change in the world around us and, in turn, feel boosted by that good and want to do more. Hope is a gift unique among human beings to envision a world different than the present and work toward building it. Great leaders, both Jewish and otherwise, have encouraged their followers to nurture this kind of hope.

Desmond Tutu, the Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa, once said that "Hope is being able to see that there is a light despite all of the darkness."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, taught that "to be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair.

Judaism is a sustained struggle against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet."²

And Elie Weisel, of blessed memory, often spoke from this same perspective: "Above all, we must not give in to cynicism. To save the life of a single child, no

² <http://rabbisacks.org/future-tense-how-the-jews-invented-hope-published-in-the-jewish-chronicle/>

effort is too much. To make a tired old man smile is to perform an essential task.

To defeat injustice and misfortune, if only for one instant, for a single victim, is to invent a new reason to hope.”³ Each of these leaders not only taught about hope, but “did hope” as well.

How will we arrive at our own particular vision of hope?

For one, we can turn to the wisdom of our tradition, which offers us sacred rituals at this time of the year that look quite different from Ms. Chang’s, but perhaps direct us toward the same goal of actualizing our hopes. Our most sacred ritual during this season, of course, is the sounding of the shofar. Each year, our liturgy reminds us that the shofar is sounded to wake us up for the purpose of teshuvah, turning or repentance. Maimonides, the Rambam, famously attempted to give words to the voice of the shofar: “Awake, you sleepers from your sleep. Arouse, you slumberers from your slumber and ponder your deeds; remember your Creator and return to God in repentance.... Look well to your souls and consider your deeds; turn away from your wrong ways and improper thoughts.” For some, this is precisely the message of the shofar.

In modern times, Jewish communities have layered on other interpretations--the call to perform social justice or tikkun olam, like the

3

<https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-life/arts-culture/literature/god-indifference-and-hope-conversation-elie-wiesel>

synagogue in Omaha. Most crucial to this ritual, I believe, is the fact that the shofar is simply sound.

As Rabbi Alan Lucas writes in the book *The Observant Life*, “To respond to the sound of the shofar requires neither formal training nor any knowledge of complex Hebrew texts, only the most basic of any supplicant’s tools: an open heart and a willing spirit.” Like the folks in New Orleans who engaged with their deepest hopes and desires using a piece of chalk and a fill-in-the-blank sentence, each of us comes to shul today to let that shofar into our heart.

Whether you close your eyes as the sound pierces the air, or you catch the eye of someone else during that moment, or your mind drifts to the ram’s horn that saved Isaac and Abraham from a terrible fate... let that call awaken your hopeful vision for your life, our community, our country, our world. Hold on to that vision. Stoke it, nourish it, and use it to figure out what steps to take next.

One other liturgical ritual that encourages hope in this season is the recitation of Psalm 27, the psalm for the season of repentance. You can read the psalm itself, along with the wonderful commentary, in our machzor. I’d like to jump right to the final verse: *kaveh el-Adonai, chazak v’ya’amez libecha, v’kaveh el-Adonai*. This is usually translated “Hope in Adonai. Be strong, take courage, and hope in Adonai.” Dr. David Arnow, a psychologist who has written extensively on many Jewish topics, including Judaism and hope, notes that the translation is not quite accurate. *Kaveh* is related to *tikvah*, like *HaTikvah*--that’s hope. And Adonai is Adonai. But *el* in Hebrew isn’t really “in”; it’s more “toward”. “Hope toward God” may be a bit more enigmatic, but

I think it's right. While "Hope in Adonai" implies that we leave our aspirations in the hands of God, "Hope toward Adonai" places the onus on us.

We may lay our deepest desires before God, and God may bear witness as we pursue them; but the act of hoping rests with each of us, the Jew, the human being. While each of us is but a small drop in the sea of humanity, the psalmist comes to reassure us that we can, in fact, be strong, courageous, and hopeful.

And so we return to Rabbi Sacks' moving description of the Jewish people: to be agents of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Yes, the facts on the ground could lead us to despair. *Shamati*, I hear that loud and clear. And yes, it will take dogged commitment to bring about change. Change takes time, it takes effort, it takes relationships, and sometimes it requires money. But none of it will be possible without the hopeful vision that rests within each one of us. If you had the chance to complete the sentence "Before I die, I want to...", what would you say? If you heard a news report like the one Rabbi Abraham heard in Omaha, would you act? And when you hear that shofar and you daven *kaveh el-Adonai*/Hope toward Adonai, what will you picture? What will you do?

There are plenty of soup kitchens in need of volunteers, and thousands of children in schools who need reading mentors. There are senior citizens in our synagogue and in the wider community who need some company, or perhaps a ride. There are countless organizations, including our own Beth El, that thrive on your creative ideas for injecting hope into the world. Indeed, there are still refugees in need of resettlement. What will you do?

Hayom Harat Olam--today is the birthday of the world.

- **TEKIYAH:** We are filled with all the potential of our hopes.
- **SHEVARIM:** We share the pain of all who suffer.
- **TERUAH:** We are motivated to jump into action.

Kaveh el-Adonai--May God bless the work of our hopeful hands. Amen.