

*It's Not Fair – Rosh Hashanah 5779
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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*There is enough drama and fire and brimstone on cable news, you do not need it from me, too.
And so, today, some words on hope, because without hope we have no fuel to repair our world.*

“It’s not fair!” There are probably no three words that parents hear more often. “She got more ice cream than me.” “How come he gets to keep using his iPad?” “Why should I have to clean up when she’s going to a friend’s house?” You get the idea. You get it because at some point some little people in your lives have made these compelling – and not so compelling – arguments. And what is our response as grown-ups? What do we tell our little ones when presented with their injustices, their sense of inequity? We tell them, “Life’s not fair.” Ahhh... the trump card we all play to dodge the kernel of truth in their complaints.

No, life is not fair, and we know that personally from too many grave moments, and we see it in the world around us in serious events and troubling trends. A child’s call of “It’s not fair” reminds us that while we should let the little things go, we cannot become inured to the injustices around us. We have to face those things – small and large – which put one person ahead of another, which cause harm to the community or nation, which provide short term gain but will bring about long term pain. We need to pay attention when “It’s not fair.” We need to do something because sometimes the injustices are not small at all. Sometimes they matter a great deal for us and for the world that we give to our children.

When we look at the problems facing our world, we can quickly become overwhelmed. But we are not the first generation to feel overwhelmed by the task of repairing the world. Indeed, every generation feels this way. Going all the way back to the Talmud we find exasperation at the size of the task. And, also in the Talmud, we also find some advice that addresses the magnitude of the task and a way to approach that work. “וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוּרִין לְבַטֵּל”¹ “Rabbi Tarfon used to say, ‘It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.’”¹ Even if we cannot solve a problem completely, we still have an obligation to do our part to address the problem. The great 18th century scholar and ethicist, Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, explained that this specifically refers to power. We cannot give up working towards a better world simply because we do not have the power to complete the task ourselves.² We have to do what we can.

Of course there are actions we can take, and I’ll get to those, but real change takes time. So, in the meantime, in the face of so much injustice, so little compassion, so much tribalism, we must hold dear the teaching of the 19th century Hassidic master, Rav Nachman of Bratzlav: “Never despair! Never! It is forbidden to give up hope!”³ Jewish tradition forbids us from giving into the malaise that accompanies the news headlines of today. Instead, tradition demands that we foster a sense of *tikvah*, of hope, even when we feel like screaming, “It’s not fair!”

¹ Pirkei Avot 2:16

² Messilat Yesharim 19:124

³ Likutei Moharan II:78

Krista Tippett, the wise and thoughtful host of NPR's show *On Being*, offers the following, "Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice that becomes spiritual muscle memory. It's a renewable resource for moving through life as it is, not as we wish it to be."⁴ How do we cultivate hope as a virtue? How do we build a spiritual muscle memory for hope in the face of injustice and unfairness? I think it's about inputs, perspectives, and outputs. We can start with the inputs, those things that we allow into our minds to shape our perspective.

In order for those muscles of hope to take shape, we have to lift the shutters of 24/7 news that blocks out so much light. This is not, by any means, a call to ignore the events of our day. Rather, we can acknowledge that we are "analog creatures living in a digital age."⁵ Evolutionarily speaking, we are better equipped to dig for grubs in the earth than to take in a constant stream of troubling news. To see and learn of calamitous and baffling events from around the world 24-hours a day runs counter to our basic physiology, our limited mental capacity, and surely our delicate spiritual selves. We can – we must – still read the news once a day, twice a day, but a steady, day-long diet of despair can quickly atrophy the hope we need to change the world for the better.

Instead of bad news and despair, we can input goodness. We can choose to focus, for at least part of our days, on the practical sources of hope that are all around us. Heartwarming news stories are a good start. But surrounding us are people and institutions that make a sustained difference for good, which provide even more nourishment for our souls. Groups on our side of political fights give uplift. But we can find profound inspiration in our lived experience of goodness and hope, our experience of generative realities and possibilities that can – that will – move the world to a better place. A child helping another on a playground is just as real as the roll back of consumer protections. A rehabilitated white supremacist who now fights hate is just as real as Nazis marching in our streets. Young people standing under the chuppah with their beloveds is just as real as families separated from one another. Each of these good and true and kind and hopeful realities will grow to become a better a future. They are as integral to the world as the nightmarish news. Allowing space for that goodness in our minds and hearts feeds and strengthens our muscles of hope.

After adjusting our inputs, internalizing the goodness around us, our perspective will shift. For example, in those moments when we feel impatience with current events creep in, our new perspective will allow us to more easily call to mind Rabbi Tarfon's wisdom that while we may not finish the work, we have a vital role to play in moving it forward. With this in our hearts, our new perspective will make us more patient. And we need patience. The cultural shifts of our day do not play out in one election cycle. These shifts play out in generational time. And so, rather than wallow in the aggravation of one moment, this new perspective will give us the patience to make hope corporeal, to embody the world that we hope to inhabit in the future.

Central to developing a new, hopeful perspective is "keeping our hearts and our imaginations and our energy oriented towards what we want to build, what we want to create, what we're

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/about/becoming-wise-the-book/discussion-guide-chapter-six-of-becoming-wise/>

⁵ <https://onbeing.org/programs/living-the-questions-1/>

walking towards.”⁶ This is the hallmark of the Jewish people. As difficult as this moment feels, we have experienced so much worse. We did not prevail over the obstacles of 2000 years in exile by focusing only on our problems. Oh, we faced our problems, but we also cultivated a hope in the future born of glimmers of joy and goodness and patience and blessing in the present. If our ancestors could face their worlds with hope in the future, with gratitude for the present, then we can, too.

That gratitude is not just a perspective, it is also an output. Ours is a faith tradition with a monumental focus on gratitude which fosters hope. Each time we say a blessing it is an expression of thanksgiving for the world around us. Whether a blessing for food or light or health, our tradition provides these spoken sacred vessels to contain the gratitude that mindful living evokes. Each blessing can touch our hearts. *בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהֵחֵינּוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה*. Praised are you God, Sovereign of the Universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling to reach this moment. Gratitude for the wonder of simply being alive, for the blessing of coming to one, particular moment in time. Two thousand years ago, when Rabbi Meir commanded us to say 100 blessings a day,⁷ he knew that gratitude is a choice that must become a practice if it is to become muscle memory and evolve into hope.

And so, after changing our inputs and shifting our perspective, we can take the first step towards hope by simply pausing long enough to recognize the goodness in our lives. To recognize it and to name it and to call it out and to share it with others and to express our gratitude for that goodness and to say in that one instant that while life might not be fair, while external events may be corrupt or scary or unjust, there is goodness, real goodness, in the wonders of the world all around us and in the small, intimate moments of our lives. Whether we express that with traditional words of blessing or with a deep breath or by posting on facebook or texting an emoji, no matter how we do it, when we regularly express gratitude in our lives, that output will develop the muscles of hope that allow us to face an uncertain world, a difficult world, a world beset by problems but still so full of blessing and goodness.

We all know people whose outputs, whose acts of benevolence and love and sacrifice, bring heart and blessing to our community and our world. Think for a moment of the people you know who demonstrate generosity and uprightness. Their small goodnesses combine with one another and really do shift our reality, even the direction of our society. We can each be those people. When we fill ourselves with gratitude, when we learn to let the blessings of the world delight us, when we can see a better future in the acts of others, we will have hope in our hearts.

We can then radiate a different world from within. After expressions of gratitude, the next output to shift is our very language, the piece of ourselves that we use most to engage with the world. How do we talk about other people? Are we soft and kind? Do we give the benefit of the doubt? Or, do we strive for vitriol? Do we talk about our problems in a way that unnecessarily amplifies them or quiets them? How can we speak about the issues impacting our world in ways that further our values, our hopes for resolution? For example, how do we describe those coming across our borders and floating on ships from Africa to Europe? Do we call them Migrants? Refugees? Threats? Foreigners? Immigrants? Criminals? Aliens? Strangers? Do we call them

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Talmud, Menachot 43b

people? If we simply called them “People” it would shape the narrative in dramatic ways. “...What a difference it would be, both for the journalists reporting [this phenomenon] and the politicians legislating it and for us [if we simply called them “people,” our fellow human beings.]”⁸ Our creation myth teaches that God created the world with words.⁹ We deeply understand the importance of language to shape our reality. Do we wield language in a way that furthers despair or that gives us hope? How we mold the vital output of language is a choice that each of us can make, a choice that will grow or diminish our stores of hope.

The final output is action and Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester makes it easy for each of us to do something, no matter our political perspective or time constraints. We start right here with meals for bereaved families and rides to services for those who cannot drive at night. Our social action and social justice initiatives provide a great way to make a difference. From the High Holy Day Food drive to Mitzvah Shabbat in the spring, Emanu-El gives us myriad ways to directly impact our local community. And social justice, too: relationship building with elected representatives, lobbying in Albany, and our effort this fall to achieve 100% voter participation from our congregation. We take steps to address the root causes of inequality and injustice. We also build bridges through conversations among congregants who hold different political views. And so, while no one person can make our world completely just and fair, please, do something, get involved. (By the way, you can sign up for any of these important activities at the back of the sanctuary after services.)

Hope is not a luxury. Hope is the foundation of faith, the nourishment of the heart that feeds the soul in times good and bad. Input, perspective, output and action are merely my humble attempts to provide some guideposts from our tradition. Used with intention, these may point towards a hopeful frame for our world that can so often be filled with despair. Our longing for hope in this moment can be realized as it has been over the millennia that our people has walked the earth. In his beautiful, longing poem, אָנְעִים זְמִירוֹת, the 12th century rabbi, Yehudah HeHassid wrote, “כִּי אֶלֶיךָ נַפְשִׁי תַעְרָג” “My soul yearns for You.”¹⁰ That yearning for God is a yearning for hope, that same yearning that we have today. And just as our ancestors in Rav Yehudah’s time could find hope when they expressed that yearning, we can also find it if we allow ourselves to say כִּי אֶלֶיךָ נַפְשִׁי תַעְרָג, if we allow our souls to yearn for God, for holiness, for goodness. Then we, too, shall find the hope that will bring blessings to our lives.

It’s not only children who say, “It’s not fair.” We all say it sometimes. And while the world may, indeed, be unfair, that does not mean that we need to live bereft of hope. Einstein, who opened our eyes to the wonders of science, also spoke of spiritual geniuses. These include some of the people who changed religion or changed the world through the power of their spiritual innovations. But what matters today is not the religious leader but the spiritual genius within each of us. That genius is our ability to be what Krista Tippett calls yes/and people.¹¹ Yes, we can see the world as it is with all its woes and difficulties and suffering. It is that, yes. And, we can wake each morning, allow our souls to yearn for hope, and wonder at the simple miracle of being alive, at the generative goodness and possibility all around us. Fostering that kind of

⁸ <https://onbeing.org/programs/living-the-questions-1/>

⁹ Genesis 1

¹⁰ Shabbat and Holiday Siddur

¹¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/living-the-questions-1/>

spiritual genius within will fill our cups with the hope we need to face the world, to repair the world. May this yes/and hope seep into our spirits and help us live in a new year that is better, kinder, more just, and more fair.

לשנה טובה