

## Hope for the Future

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So here we are. I have spoken to you on RH morning for over 20 years. This is my final shot.

Moses had one last address before he and the people Israel parted ways. It took him 36 days to say his piece, which became the Book of Deuteronomy, 34 chapters long. I'll try to be quicker.

When I was a student at JTS, I went to the Cantors Assembly Convention at Grossingers. In those days the Jewish world assumed we students were broke - which we were - and they gave us very low tuition and perks like a free day at a Catskills Resort.

As I walked through the lobby where booths were set up, I was taken by a lithograph on display. Fiery and colorful, it held a quotation from Jeremiah. *V'Yesh Tikva l'achreitech*. And there is hope for the future. I was starting a new path. The work spoke to my heart. I asked the artist, Seymour Rosenstein, if he ever sold his works on the installment plan. I offered to pay it off monthly over a year if he would hold it for me. Rosenstein agreed enthusiastically, but insisted that I take the work home with me right away. I was overwhelmed by his trust and idealism. I understood how Jewish Life binds us to our best promises. That work of art is in the hall outside my office. I have looked at it nearly every day for 4 decades.



Hope is the basis of all good things. Jeremiah had a rough go of it. He saw our folly, and was jailed for his truth telling. He found out the hard way that a true prophet tells people what they don't want to hear.

Yet he spoke of overriding hope. We cannot run from the marvelous promise that lies within us. Our actions matter, we suffer from our errors. We benefit from our virtues. God will bring us back when we stray. And the future is beautiful.

Steven Pinker, a Harvard Professor, has written a major work addressing "Why violence has declined in the World." He calls it Angels of our Better Nature, from Lincoln's second inaugural address.

Pinker shows that every marker tells the same story. Violence in the world, homicides, capital punishment, corporal punishment in school, and in the home. All these continue to decline. Civil rights, human rights, women's rights, children's rights, even animal rights, all are on the upswing. He refers to the long peace: wars are avoided by major powers, armed conflict is confined to

smaller largely non-democratic states. The trend is for the better, over the centuries as well as the decades.

Now I know this doesn't seem right. His statistics contradict our experience of the news. Our anxiety and common understanding tell us the world is in terrible shape. Maybe that is our strength. Perhaps the degree of our pain from terrible things that happen makes a difference. Our outrage tells us that we are healthy. A child's fever is often so very high - the entire organism bends to the removal of the infection of the youthful body.

As we find inhumane things intolerable, they become increasingly rare. Our inner life changes the whole world around us. Okay, maybe the world is improving. But how about in the USA? Most people would say "it doesn't seem like things are going in the right direction." Yet Pinker and others can show overwhelmingly positive markers of change over time. Except for one that catches the eye. The life span of white, middle aged Americans is going down. Suicide rates and substance abuse is up for this population, that once was the primary rank of American prosperity. The shift to a modern technologically driven economy has left white mature males behind, as physical labor and manual skills are less necessary in the workplace. And it shows.

71 per cent of white males voted for Trump in the last election. His anger expresses their experience. They are his loyal minions. They don't just like his policies- they identify with him. His anger is their anger, his prejudices are theirs.

Now we have three parties- the Democrats, the Republicans, and Trumpism. Perhaps, we should recognize the moral failing that caused this phenomenon. The white working class was overlooked. We had a "jobless recovery" from the recession, while Wall Street flourished. The banks were rescued, not the individual mortgage holders. Companies were long encouraged to move production overseas; our economy was transformed with digital and robotic

automation, unions were diminished. All the while no social policy addressed the effect of all this on the workers left behind.

Heschel's words ring as true as ever, "Do I have to tell you that life is a drama?" Let me speak plainly. The Trump White House engenders a culture of brutal self-interest, where idealism and propriety are viewed as signs of weakness. The country has been thrust into turmoil by the improper speech and conduct of the chief executive over and over again, to the point where he has most recently circulated predictions of civil war if he is convicted of high crimes and misdemeanors by the congress. Moreso, this behavior is accepted as the normal course of business by a substantial number of American citizens.

As presidential historian John Meecham recently asked, "Will 40 per cent of our country continue to be intoxicated by the will to power?"

The Talmud refers to such a phenomenon, when it says "*L'es din, l'es dayan.*" Literally, there is no court, there is no judge. At certain times, right does not necessary triumph. What will preserve the integrity of our republic? Will the center hold?

I affirm that we will not collapse. American society is democratic at its core. The American system is healthy. We have a strong dissenting political party. We have independent state governments. The legal system, the press, local political clubs, unions, fraternal groups- these remain fractious, cranky, often a bit wrongheaded, and wonderfully independent. Our economic institutions are strong, as well. Many of our companies are like small nation-states.

We are, and will remain, a democracy, because there is power in so many places.

In Woodlands, for example. We have risen to affirm our moral power in crisis - we reach out to the vulnerable and the poor, to the stranger and the dissenter. We are stronger for it, as we affirm our willingness to do God's work on earth

and heal the world. We are a home to Torah, to worship, as we teach our kids to carry their Jewishness proudly. We show them how to serve and to pray.

Under our Rabbis we have built a community that is idealistic and kind in every conceivable way. Here we take the word of God and transform ourselves, as well as our world. We are a piston in the engine of hope. We pay strict attention to the laws of personal conduct. How many times has Billy repeated the rules of speech that must guide our daily dealings? Kindness is requisite. Honesty is a given. Gossip is out. Destructive speech is a blood crime.

Here we show concern for everyone. Do you know that Rabbi Mara knows the name of every student in the religious school, plus their family and their circumstances? To her, each student is an individual, a promise, a universe. We serve God by perfecting our relationships with each other.

When I first came to Woodlands, I attended a staff meeting with Billy and Harriet, our Educator. Harriet mentioned that one student had an outside conflict the coming Sunday. Could we change the schedule for the session so he could participate? I had come from a place where the Rabbi would have smiled dismissively. But Billy said “sure,” and they changed the entire morning routine, it took a long while to work out all the details. That’s Woodlands. Every person is important. How we treat each other is vital. That’s what makes us strong and young in spirit. Our conduct is the job we do every day.

Woodlands also faces challenge. Can we remain idealistic and courageous? Will you continue to roll up your sleeves and chip in? As any kid will tell you, they know Spiderman, with power comes responsibility. Each of you has power. I charge you to join a committee, volunteer for service, join the choir to support the new Cantor, continue your Jewish learning. Help keep this place going. Give a bit more money to this institution than you can easily afford. It’s not for yourself. That’s the point. It’s for something bigger than any one of us. Find a way to serve a higher power. It accrues to your own benefit and to the future of

us all. As our sages taught, “These things bring us credit in his world and in the world to come.”

This morning I’ve tried to show how what we do makes a difference in the world. By having hope, we have power, which in turn puts hope into the world. I’ve addressed different spheres of experience - our greater world, our country, our congregation and community.

How about that ultimate arena - the one that changes everything, our inner life? Here we encounter the urgency and the peace that come from our relationship with God. How do we make positive change in our personal spiritual life? Franz Rosenzweig wrote that awareness of God is like a temporary eclipse. On one side of the world a person sees darkness and says, “There is no Sun.” On the other side of the globe a person says, “the bright light is all around me.” Still, human beings yearn to get closer to something greater. We see the sunbeams in the window, and want to view the sun that sends them on their way. How can we come to believe? A guy once told his wife, “Oh man, I completely blew my diet today. I was just so darn hungry.” She said, “You know there are cans of asparagus in the cupboard.” “Oh no, I wasn’t that hungry.”

For those who do wish to find faith in a great spiritual quest, Jeremiah gives hope. “You shall find me when you search for me with all your heart.”

Tradition teaches that a person say is to say 100 grateful blessings each day, each one to acknowledge a specific wonderful thing we recognize in a generous universe. A person who does this, day after day, will, in time, come to believe in a higher power, and will establish a relationship with God. If we are that hungry. Every Shabbat we sing “*l’dor vador nagid godlecha.*” Every new generation calls to God. But if we reach for God, will God answer?

Of course. It is the eternal dialogue. God answers, for example, in the Haftarah I will chant next Shabbat, "*Shuva yisrael Ad Adonai elohecha.*" Turn to me, people of Israel. God waits patiently for each of us. We can change, we can grow, we can become more than we were before.

Judaism has put hope into the world. We ask and are answered. We speak our conscience with our hands. We learn that our inner values and our smallest actions make a universe of difference. Jewish teachings transform society, and nurture the best that is within us. There is hope everywhere. Just as Jeremiah said.

This morning I want to tell you that each of us is a light. We illumine ourselves and our neighbors with every action we take. We create the canvas of our lives with the brush strokes we make every day.

Speaking for myself, when I was young, I understood that God is near to me. I felt God at all times - just behind my right shoulder. God has been my witness, a source of warm affirmation in good times and bad. Now that I am older, I feel a change. I think I would like to live my life with God directly in front of me. God is worthy of the honor. I hope I am. My life of service in the world and my personal dialogue with God exist together, inextricably linked.

Moses spoke to the Children of Israel just as they were about to part. Similarly, you and I will soon part. The difference is that I am the one going to the promised land. And yet-to speak more seriously - every place where Jews live will become a promised land, if we are up to it. More than hope, it is a certainty, because our spirit is willing, and the promise is firm.

May this year, and every year after, be filled with joy and blessing, and may time reveal the best that lies within us. *Gut Yontif.*

## Final benediction

There is a blessing we say upon hearing bad tidings, blessed is God, the true judge. It is usually recited when one receives news of someone's death.

We say it more often than we would like.

But there is another twin blessing, one that is hardly ever said, one that I recommend to you. You could use it as a tool in your daily life, if you are inclined.

It is to be said when one hears good tidings. When one regards a wonderful event or unexpected blessing. It would be possible to say it many times on a day when we are keenly aware of our place in this generous universe.

I'd like to teach it to you this morning as a final gift to take with you into the New Year.

Blessed are you, our God, Who is Good, and bestows goodness.

*Baruch Ata Adonai, melech haolam, Hatov, v'hameitiv.*