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Yom Kippur 2017

Finding Joy

3 months ago, the week we moved to Olney, Mark, my fiancé, received a phone call from his father that he was on his way to the hospital. Mark Sr. wasn't feeling very well and felt weak - so he was headed to the hospital to get checked out. Fast forward 6 weeks later, when I received a phone call that Mark's father would likely not make it through the night. I got on a plane 4 hours later and headed to Texas. The entire time, I was filled with anxiety and fear. My plane landed and I called Mark and he told me that his dad was in a coma-like state and was no longer speaking...it could be any minute. Mark's sister and nephew picked me up from the airport and we raced to the hospital – trying to make it there before he passed away.

And then a miracle happened. Mark Sr. woke up as we arrived. He was surrounded by family. If only I could freeze-frame the image of the smile on Mark Sr's face. He didn't express his pain or even his sadness that his life was coming to an end...instead, he told jokes, asked how we were doing, wanted to know about our plans for our wedding; his priority was simple – to make us smile, feel loved and remind us that the Cowboys are the best. Throughout his time in the hospital, he was not one to complain. He held out hope that the doctors would figure out how to help him. And when he realized that there was nothing left for the doctors to do for him, he had hope, not that he would live for months, but that the time he had left could be spent surrounded by family and friends. It wasn't that he was filled with happiness, because happiness is fleeting and is based on a circumstance. What I learned from Mark Sr. on that day was the meaning of hope and joy.

Joy is much bigger than happiness. While happiness is often seen as being dependent on external circumstances, joy is not. But, is it really possible to be joyful even in the face of our daily troubles? Many different fields of knowledge point to the same truth: suffering is inevitable, but how we respond to that suffering is our choice.

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu spent one week together exploring the nature of true joy. The Dalai Lama shared “it doesn’t matter whether one is a Buddhist like me, or a Christian like the Archbishop, or any other religion, or no religion at all. From the moment of birth, every human being wants to discover happiness and avoid suffering. No differences in our culture or education affect this. The problem is that our world and our education remain focused exclusively on external, materialistic values. Everyone seeks happiness, but from the outside – from money, power, big car, big house. Most people never pay much attention to the ultimate source of a joyful life, which is inside, not outside”

Joy subsumes happiness and is the far greater thing. Think of a mother who is going to give birth. Almost all of us want to escape pain. And mothers know they are going to have pain, the great pain of giving birth. But they accept it. And even after the most painful labor, once the baby is out, you can’t measure the mother’s joy. It is one of those incredible things that joy can come so quickly after suffering.

There is a Buddhist saying: trying to seek happiness through sensory gratification is like trying to quench your thirst by drinking saltwater. The more you drink, the

thirstier you become. The more you grasp at material things, the more despair you will feel.

The Zohar, Jewish mystical text, notes that the Hebrew word for “in happiness” (*b’simcha*) contains the same letters as the Hebrew word for ‘thought’ (*machshava*). This is understood to mean that the key to happiness is found through our minds, by training oneself to weed out any negative thought that prevents one from experiencing happiness. We cannot bring peace if we do not have inner peace. The challenge becomes: how do we find inner peace? When the torn cloth of our world is endlessly being ripped and rewoven, how do we find hope and joy?

I once heard a story about a town far from here where one day all the clocks stopped working. Despite the people’s best efforts, they could not get them to start again. Though many in the village were handy, there wasn’t anyone who understood the inner workings of the apparatus, the springs and dials, the gears and pendulum. Because they were secluded, years passed until a man who wandered into the village was discovered to be a watchmaker.

Quickly the town became abuzz, each bringing him their own clocks, hoping this stranger could fix them. One after another lined up, hoping that their most important family heirlooms could be returned to working order. But soon, each of the villagers met disappointment. After many long winters and wet summers, their clocks were too rusted to salvage.

Yet, among all the heartache and sadness, there was one person who did get good news; the watchmaker could fix his clock. Soon, everyone was gathered around this

lucky time teller, asking his secret. Why could the watchmaker salvage his clock and no other? “When our clocks stopped, I didn’t know what else to do” the watchmaker said, “so I kept winding my clock each morning as if it worked.” And that simple act of hope and faith had kept it from rusting over.

For many of us, this past year has been a tough one. Some of us have faced personal hardships. Some have lost loved ones. Others have encountered illness. Some have struggled with difficulties at work, while others have faced challenges at home. Many have looked at insurmountable hurdles and have felt the pull of despair.

We have all faced national tragedies. We have looked at a world filled with suffering and felt our helplessness. We have stared into the fury of nature and felt utterly exposed, amidst floods, fire, hurricanes and earthquake. We have felt powerless to stop anti-Semitism, racism, bigotry, and hate.

Many of us carry fear. We wear it on our shoulders. We bare it on our backs. Many worry about tomorrow. Staring into a bleak and uncertain future, the path of least resistance is to give up hope.

Yet, hope is precisely what we need in the darkest of times. As it was for the townspeople, despair is the pathway to ruin. When we give up hope, we allow our hearts to rust over. But when we keep hope alive, when we wind our clocks expectantly, we make possible the future for which we yearn.

But what exactly is hope? It’s not exactly optimism, which is the belief that everything will turn out fine. It doesn’t mean that you don’t experience fears, anger, or loneliness. And it’s not confidence, which is a certainty that you can achieve what you seek. No. Hope is much more elusive. Hope is the belief that through our efforts, we might get closer and even reach our goals. Hope, Archbishop Tutu said,

“is quite different from optimism, which is more superficial and liable to become pessimism when the circumstances change. Hope is something deeper.” He continues, “I say to people that I’m not an optimist, because that is something that depends on feelings more than actual reality. We feel optimistic, or we feel pessimistic. Now, hope is different in that it is based on the firm ground of conviction. Hope, is the antidote to despair.”

As Rabbi Michael Marmur once wrote, “Optimism is passive; hope is active. Unlike optimism or pessimism, which are qualities we are often born with, hope is something we can embrace...while optimism is a matter of personality or disposition, hope is a matter of faith.”

As surprising as it might sound, many great thinkers through history have not embraced the idea of hope. In his history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides scoffed at those with hope; one could look at the future expectantly but all the hope in the world will not help them when armies appear on their doorstep. He feared that hope would delay action and in his world, action is what mattered most.

Likewise, Seneca and his fellow stoic philosophers dismissed hope. For them, a person’s chief task is to learn to live in the present. Hope may seem useful but it teaches us to look to the future and when we begin to leave the present we open the door for other less helpful future-dependent emotional outlooks like fear and anxiety. If I hope for an outcome, I will also fear not achieving it. As he writes, “Widely different though they are, [hope and fear] they march in unison like a prisoner and the escort he is handcuffed to.” (Seneca, Letter 5.7–8)

Yet, history has proven that hope is indispensable to our lives. The Jewish people knew this early on. We are a religion built on the idea of hope. Our ancestors are paragons of hope in their personal struggles. Our Bible is filled with stories of

women who are too old to have children, holding on to the dream of motherhood and finding it. It contains stories of lovers, searching for companionship and one day achieving it. It contains the story of King Hezekiah, who the Bible tells us was sick and one day and received word that he was going to die. Unwilling to accept this decree, he turned his face toward the wall and prayed with fervor to be revived. God heard his prayer and because Hezekiah had not given up hope, added more than a decade to his life.

Yet as inspiring as these stories may be, it is in our national story that the power of hope truly shines through. Jewish history is not an easy one. We've faced enemies stronger than us who seek our destruction. We have lived in exile for two thousand years away from our homeland. We have gained and lost power, attained agency and watched it disappear. In each of these moments, it has been our communal hope that has kept us alive.

We are a people whose great heroes are not warriors but prophets who dance between words of rebuke and messages of hope and comfort. After the first Temple is destroyed, they warn against despair: build houses, plant vineyards, live in the present - while working for the future. And in every generation, this message of hope rings forth. It was with us as we wandered throughout Europe from expulsion to expulsion. It held us after pogroms broke out in Eastern Europe. It found its voice among the great Zionist thinkers of old. It was in the hands and hearts of those who painted the sign above the Breslav synagogue in Warsaw during the Holocaust that read "Gevalt Jews! Don't give up."

There is little wonder then, that when Israel became a state and they sought out a national anthem, they chose to call it Hatikvah, The Hope.

Though important, hope is not easy. It takes courage to hope. True courage is not running into a battle knowing the outcome. It is entering a struggle knowing you could fail but doing it anyway. Seneca was right. It's a scary thing to hope because there's a good chance you will greet disappointment. Early on, with plenty of time before us, hope is infinite. But when time passes and we have not come closer to our dreams it's much easier to give up. But just because hope takes fortitude and bravery- doesn't mean we should avoid it. As psychologist Brene Brown once taught, "you can choose courage and you can choose comfort but you cannot choose both." Knowing you have helped to build the future you have hoped for, makes it all the more meaningful when you do.

But even if we fall short, even if we never reach our dream, hope still matters. In the 1990s a group of researchers tracked down nearly 700 nuns who took their vows during the 1930s. These nuns were special, because their mother superior had asked them when entering their service to write an autobiographical statement of their lives. The researchers compared these statements with the health of these nuns, now in their 80s, 90s, and 100s. What they found was the nuns who had fared better were the ones who early on displayed many of the foundational positive emotions of good living: contentment, gratitude, happiness, love and chief among these, hope!

In other words, hope doesn't just sustain our dreams, it keeps us healthy, body and soul.

Think of the last time someone cut you off while you were driving. There are two ways to respond to the situation. You can let frustration really eat you up or you can say, that person might be rushing to the hospital because his wife is giving birth or because a loved one is dying. It doesn't matter if you don't know exactly what they might have, but you know that they are all suffering with different worries and fears

because they are human. You can turn to God and say, “Please God, give each one of them what they need” and transcend our default perspective of self-centeredness.”

For these reasons, among others, our ancient Rabbis understood the true risks of turning toward despair. For them, despair was a legal category called *yeush*, and it was an important linchpin in civil law.

The Torah teaches that when one finds a lost object, it is our obligation to return it to the owner. If we fail to do this, if we pocket it rather than bring it back, we are liable for stealing. Yet, not every item can be returned. Some don’t have an identifying mark. Others, like a dollar bill, are lost too often and the people who find it are too excited to ever give it back.

Up to this point, all of this makes sense. But the revolution of Jewish law is that if one finds a lost object, one cannot keep it unless the owner has given up hope of getting it back. Unless the owner has been through this process of *yeush*, unless he has resigned himself to a life without his wallet or hat or backpack, it is not yours to take. Jewish legal codes are filled with the parameters of this problematic law. How can we tell if someone has given up hope? What if we know they will in the future? Can we hold on to the object while we wait for them to despair?

What is important are not the specifics of the law but the overarching message: when we give up hope, when we despair, we relinquish agency and control to that which is most important to us. Without hope, others get the things, live the life, make the choices that should have been ours!

If we give up our vision for the future, others have the right to forge a path without us. It is only when we accept the present, that we can forgive and release the desire for a different past.

Have you ever walked down a street feeling judgmental and critical of others? It makes us feel lonely and separate. But the next day, we can walk down the same street with a more openhearted acceptance and compassion and suddenly everyone seems warm and friendly. It is almost as if our inner state of mind and heart changes the physical and social world around us completely.

So many religious traditions define who is part of the group and who is not. Removing the barriers between who we see as ‘us’ versus who we see as ‘them’ is one of the greatest challenges humanity faces.

In African villages, one would ask in greeting, not “how are **you**,” but “How are **we**?” This understanding sees that someone else’s achievements or happiness is in a very real way our own. In Buddhism, this concept of sympathetic joy is called *Bundita*. We can consciously take joy in someone else’s good fortune. We need to develop the sense of ‘we’. We need to learn as a culture to rejoice in other’s good fortune because we will be happy that what that person aspires to is being obtained. There is a Tibetan teaching that says what causes suffering in life is a general pattern of how we relate to others; envy toward others, competitiveness toward the equal, and contempt toward the lower. Envy does not leave room for joy.

A few weeks ago, I was discussing the laws of found objects and the role of despair with someone who pointed out to me that when she was single and traveling in Israel, she ended up in Meah Shearim, the most ultra-orthodox neighborhood in Israel, at the home of a rebbetzin. She was there because she wanted to find a prayer that she could say that would help her find love. Needless to say, she was completely surprised when she was given a slip of paper that said nothing of husbands and families. Instead, she was instructed to offer a prayer for “finding a lost object.”

This prayer helped her keep her hope alive. It reminded her that the thing that was most important to her at that moment was not gone. And if she held out hope, if she resisted the urge of *yeush*, if she avoided despair, she might still find love.

If these days are dark for you, your light is not gone. Instead, you have simply misplaced it. Have hope you will find it again.

On Yom Kippur, I often think of the mystical notion of the lost light of the universe. According to legend, when God created the world, God created a special kind of light. This was the light that God spoke into being when God said the words, “let there be light.” But this light is not the same light we see today. It is not the sun, the moon, or the stars. Those primordial beams were too powerful and dangerous and after Adam and Eve left the garden of Eden, God hid it away from us. We lost the light.

Our goal, through acts of love and faith, is to uncover humanity’s misplaced light which will shine forth for us. Though the world may seem chaotic and bleak, as long as we hold out hope that we will once again bask in this Divine light, we will someday find it. It is only when we stop the search, that the light disappears.

We are clock winders, defiantly ignoring the urge to stop.

We are searchers, unable to give up hope of finding that which seems lost to us.

We are pioneers, making a path toward light in a dark and unsteady world.

Death is inevitable. It is the way it should be. A beginning. A middle. An end. It is this cycle that makes life precious and beautiful. However, it does not make the sorrow any less for those who lose someone they love. Joy is the reward, really, of seeking to give joy to others. The goal of human life is to live with joy and purpose.

That is the simple wisdom that I learned from Mark Sr. during his final days. Joy is not dependent on a situation and hope is not always about life being better for yourself.

Alfred Tennyson once wrote:

“Hope
Smiles from the threshold of the year to come,
Whispering 'it will be happier'...”

Whatever last year brought for you, let hope and joy in. Let it wash away any semblance of despair. This year is a new year. You have made it this far. Your future may be uncertain, but it need not continue your past. When life seems overwhelming, when you feel out of control, there is one thing that no one can take from you: your stubborn, audacious, courageous, and resilient joy and hope.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah – May you be inscribed in the Book of life