From Fear to Hope

On Rosh Hashanah morning the rabbi noticed little Sammy staring up at the plaque in the synagogue lobby. It was covered with names, and American flags stood on either side. The seven-year old had been staring at the memorial for some time, so the rabbi walked up and said, “Shana tova, Sammy. May you be inscribed for a good year.”

“Shana tova, Rabbi,” answered Sammy, but he was still focused on the plaque. The rabbi was about to leave when Sammy asked, “Rabbi, what is this?” “Well, Sammy, it’s a memorial to all the men and women who died in the service.” Silently, they stood together, staring at the large plaque. Finally Sammy whispered, “Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur?”

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about anger and its debilitating and corrosive effects. I mentioned that anger often arises out of fear. This evening I want to address that underlying element of fear and explore how we can move from fear to hope.

So, what is fear? In a positive sense, fear is an evolutionary strategy to keep us safe. We’ve been created with a small almond size gland in our brains called the amygdala. It provides what has been called the fight or flight response. It is what enables us to react to a threat, say jump out of the way of a train, as well as to fear for our own well-being.

And let’s be honest, in today’s world there is a lot to fear. For example:

- Our changing climate, which has led, on one hand, to entire towns and regions in the west destroyed by firestorms, accompanied by severe drought bringing reservoirs to the lowest level on record. And on the other hand, more and stronger tropical storms, bringing torrential downpours that have drowned people in their cars or basements, not in low lying areas like New Orleans, but in places like New Jersey and New York City. Rising temperatures are leading to rising sea levels that threaten coastal areas around the world as well as endanger new areas with tropical diseases and destructive non-native flora and fauna.
- Unavoidable fear, like what we feel in the face of the COVID pandemic and how it will affect our families, friends, ourselves. Even with the arrival of effective vaccines, people still get sick and some die or are left with long lasting effects.

At other times, There are man-made fears that arise in certain times and places:

- The fear caused by those who aim to undermine American democracy;
- Or social forces that have been weaponized the fear of immigrants and refugees. Such xenophobic, reactionary, and nativist sentiments are especially odious to the Jewish soul;
- Fear of America’s changing place in the world, the sense of American exceptionalism giving way to America’s new place in the world;
- Fear of changes in our society; what will happen to health care in our country?
- Will I have to work until the age of 85 in order to draw a pension sufficient to live on?
From Fear to Hope

• And what kind of world are we bringing our children into? Though not a scientific study, I meet more people in their 20’s and 30’s who are seriously considering not having children because of the state of the world. Scary.

And we wonder, what are these fears doing to us? Unfortunately, we know. We Jews know what happens when fear becomes the new normal. Fear closes minds, builds walls, slams doors. We fear someone or something coming to take away what is ours, what we’ve fought for and worked for...We fear our way of life is being twisted and warped....When we fear the world we know is disappearing, replaced with the strange, the alien...we close our minds, and clench our fists.

So then how do we move from the shackles of fear to the freedom of hope? First, let’s consider the word Hope, its origin in the Torah and its singular place in our High Holy Day liturgy.

The Hebrew word for Hope, tikvah, first appears in an unusual biblical story about a Canaanite woman named Rahab. As the Israelites prepare to enter the Land, Moses’s successor, Joshua, sends two spies to reconnoiter. After crossing the Jordan river, the scouts arrive and stay the house of Rahav, a storied house of ill repute. As you might imagine, when word gets out about these Israelites, the Canaanites plan to attack. In that moment, Rahav, the Harlot becomes Rahav the Heroine as she protects the two Israelite scouts. As a reward, they promise that when the Israelites invade Canaan, Rahav and her family will be protected. To insure her safety, they offer her a scarlet tikvah, thread, to hang from her window. This scarlet thread becomes Rahab’s only guarantee that her household will be spared. It was literally her tikvah, her only hope.

Hope is that thread we continue to hold onto during the darkest moments in our own lives. It is the common thread that we, as a Jewish people, hold onto ever so tightly when nothing is promised, nothing is guaranteed.

Yet, the only time the word “hope” occurs in our prayers is during our evening services on these High Holy Days. As we prayed as a community this evening, asking God, “Grant hope to those who seek You.”

Moving from fear to hope involves a series of steps. The first is to recognize that while we can feel alone in the universe, we are not alone. Even on Yom Kippur, we pray a confessional prayer in the plural. As a community we are not alone, for all of humanity is interdependent and inextricably bound up together. Our task is to be agents of hope in a world threatened by despair. Every ritual, every syllable of the Jewish story...is a protest against escapism, resignation, or the blind acceptance of fate.”

The second step is believing we can change. In the ancient near east, other peoples saw time moving in a circle, cycling over and over, all preordained and predetermined. For the ancient Greeks, everything was fate; the future pre-determined by the past. But Jews rejected this determinism in favor of human agency. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief rabbi of the UK, put it “The Greeks gave the world the concept of tragedy. Jews gave it the idea of hope...”
From Fear to Hope

A third step in moving from fear to hope is to recognize our own Jewish story in the American master narrative. Our nation’s story is a narrative of redemption, told over and again in many voices. We were slaves in our own Egyptians, and through God’s grace, we were redeemed. We wandered a wilderness of adversity, and through God’s goodness, we overcame. We arrived in a Promised Land, and here, we found a blessed life. And now we bear the sacred obligation to save others, to proclaim liberty throughout the world to all its inhabitants.

The glory of American democracy is the story of hope’s triumph. It was hope that inspired us to offer the promise of equality –

- Not just to men, but to women,
- Not just to white people, but to people of all colors;
- Not just to the native born, but to immigrants and refugees;
- Not just to Europeans, but to Asians, Africans, to people of all origins;
- Not just to Christians, but Jews and Moslems and every other faith;
- Not just to straight people, but to people all across the LGBTQ rainbow;
- Not just to the typically abled, but those with differences,
- Not just to the prosperous, but to the poor, the needy, the dispossessed.

Hope grows out of the soil of this narrative of redemption. To worship a God who is creator of all is to affirm the solidarity and interdependence of all the human family, to stretch our identity beyond the circumference of my individual self, my tribe, my class, my place, to share the pursuit of a common good. In these ways, hope moves us from fear and isolation to peace and community.

While such a vision is utopian, Jewish hope does not guarantee happy endings. It is not a hope that makes everything better. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: “Hope is a conviction, rooted in trust...an ability to soar above the darkness that overshadows the divine.” Our job then is to defy the darkness. Even when things are grim and even when it feels as though tomorrow will be worse than today, we continue to hang on. We continue to hope even when we have no promise of when the world will be whole again, or if we will ever achieve peace. Our Jewish tradition teaches that we can and we must overshadow the darkness. Regardless of how things turn out, we continue to hope, as we continue to work towards making the world more whole. Because that is what Jews do.

To be clear, having hope does not mean denying our current situation but rather defying it. Sociologist Peter Berger calls hope “a signal of transcendence,” something that speaks to us from beyond where we are. Hope is future-focused, forcing us to face the facts of life and then seeing past them a desired future. As such, hope is a uniquely human quality. Among all the species on earth, only we can think in the future tense. Living with “hope in our hearts” entails a kind of dual-consciousness, where we at once dwell in the world that is and at the same time aspire to the world as it might yet be. And this is, and has always been, a constant in what it means to be a Jew throughout the ages.
From Fear to Hope

So, like generations before us, we, too, must take hold of the tikva, of that solitary thread, and use it to build toward a future still unrealized. When World II broke out, Rabbi Leo Baeck refused to leave his German community. He was sent to Terezin at the age of 70, and even there, he continued to teach. In his writings post World War II, he described Jewish hope as “ethical optimism”. Baeck wrote, “The optimism of Judaism consists of the belief in God, and consequently also a belief in man who is able to realize in himself the good which first finds its reality in God.” In other words, to be an ethical optimist entails the belief in God, but a belief, also, in human beings. A belief that each and every one of us is capable, obligated to do more than feel, more than have faith. To act. To physically take hold of the tikvah, of the flimsy thread and build a bridge towards a potential future, a better future, a more hopeful future. To question what is, and to imagine what can be.

Hope is that thread that we continue to hold onto during the darkest moments in our own lives, and in our world. It is the common thread that we, as a Jewish people hold onto ever so tightly when nothing is promised, nothing is guaranteed.

Rahab could not simply wait for God to provide, but rather the scarlet thread gave her an opening for courage. In this sense, hope, tikvah, goes beyond the feeling that everything will turn out okay. Rather, in this Jewish sense, hope is what we continue to hold onto even when a dark uncertainty abounds.

The Jewish people have held onto hope since the beginning of time. For 2000 years we survived without a land of our own, but always dreamed to return to our ancestral homeland. It’s not coincidental that Israel’s national anthem is called Hatikva, “the hope.” Despite all of the darkness of exile and persecution that filled those 2000 years, the Jewish people held onto the thread of hope.

Such a hope entails not only faith in God but faith in human beings. A belief that each and every one of us is capable, obligated to do more than feel, more than have faith. It means to act. To physically take hold of the tikvah, of the flimsy thread and build a bridge towards a potential future, a better future, a more hopeful future. To question what is, and to imagine what can be. This I would argue in not naive hope, but Jewish hope - ‘bruised and scarred, and rooted in a realistic and unsentimental understanding of the world, its cruelties and injustices’ (after Rabbi Sanford Ragins). Hope that understands, as one writer puts it, that "there are only two kinds of madness in the world one must guard against ... one is the belief that we can do everything. The other is the belief that we can do nothing..."

We who are seeking light during a dark year, when all we want to do is shut off the news, close the papers, throw our arms up and ask God, “why?”, we are given the gift of a response on this Kol Nidre, as we pray, “Grant us hope”.

This is the meaning of the words we recite over and over again during these High Holy Days, “But repentance, prayer and acts of righteousness temper Judgement’s decree”— this prayer serves as an expression of our faith when we recognize the power of our own human actions. This most awesome prayer of the High Holy Days, reminds each and every one of us that through our actions, we have the potential to act on the hope we feel. The High Holy Days challenge us to live up to that hope.

4
This New Year will not bring an end to violence and to terror. It will not bring an end to intolerance and to hate. It may not even bring an end to illness and suffering, or even fully heal broken hearts. But in this New year, let us all channel that strength of who we are as a people, who we have been as a people for thousands of years, and continue to grasp hold of that tikva, to our thread of hope. AMEN