

“The Value of Hope”

Student Rabbi Daniel Brenner, Rosh Hashanah, 5778

A couple months ago, my wife and I went to the Hollywood bowl for their July 4th fireworks spectacular. They have a tradition for their July 4th show where they play a medley of the Armed Forces anthems, and they ask veterans to stand up when their song is being played so everyone else can applaud them to thank them for their service. It is a beautiful tribute and moment. After the song was done, the conductor, Thomas Wilkins took the mic and started to speak with two of the concert goers in the front row then relayed to the rest of us what he observed. He said that there were two men, one white, and one black, who did not know each other, but just hugged after realizing they served in the same unit of the Army at different times.

Mr. Wilkins said that this scene he just witnessed gave him so much hope. How beautiful it was to see two strangers meeting and connecting, regardless of race or identity. He continued to speak at some length about the idea of hope and its importance in our world, and then he said something that has stuck with me since that day. Something that has rattled around in my mind so much that I had to speak about it tonight. He said that Hope, is the gift God has given to us because we lack the ability to predict the future. Hope, is the gift God has given to us because we lack the ability to predict the future.

Tonight that is what I want to talk about, hope. What makes hope unique? What is the difference between saying we hope for something and, maybe we ask for something, or we want something? Is there a Jewish way to hope? And what does hope have to do with Rosh Hashana. These are the questions I want to get to the heart of tonight.

I started my search for understanding hope in the Torah because, well frankly, where else would I start? What I found was surprising. The Hebrew word for hope, Tikvah, does not exist in the Torah. It's not there. Not when Noah rode out the storm on the ark, not when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, not even when they were wandering in the desert. So I kept searching into later parts of the Tanakh, the Hebrew bible, for the word tikvah. It wasn't there when Samson lost all his strength and was captured by the Philistines, or when David fought Goliath. No, The first time the word Hope appears is more than halfway through the tanakh with the prophet Jeremiah, and that is very significant.

You see, Jeremiah is the prophet who sees the destruction of Jerusalem and the first Temple, and the beginning of the exile of Israelites to Babylon. It is not a coincidence that this turning point in Jewish history is also the first recorded use of the word hope. Previous to the destruction of the Temple, there was no need for hope. The Israelites knew what to expect. They knew what the future would be because God told them. They would

continue to be God's chosen people, making sacrifices and living under the grace of God forever. When the Israelites suddenly lost their way of worship and were kicked out of the land they called home, they began to feel abandoned by God. When they could no longer predict what would happen next, they began to hope. It is exactly what the orchestra conductor said, "Hope is the gift God has given us because we lack the ability to predict the future."

I want to try something with you all. I have a passage here from a book where Rabbi Yehuda Fine, who is a rabbi currently in New York, describes the Jewish concept of hope. I am going to replace each time he says the word hope with the word God. Tell me if it still more or less makes sense.

God gives us the strength to develop a peaceful optimism toward life. God gives us great courage to face seemingly insurmountable obstacles. When facing darkness, fear, and pain, God teaches us that we can begin to understand and accept our imperfections and make use of the tremendous potential we possess. By seeing the world through the eyes of God, we can truly begin to honor our uniqueness.

Does it work? Can you picture the Israelite who believed this? Maybe some of us in this room still feel this way? Now I want to read if for you the way he actually wrote it.

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I think it is incredible how little the message changes. How similar the two readings are. What this tells me is that when I feel hopeful, there is a bit of divinity in that. Hoping is divine. That is what makes hope different from asking or wishing for something. When we hope for something, we add God.

On Rosh Hashanah we read the prayer Unetane Tokef, and within that prayer is one of the most iconic lines of the high holidays. “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die.” The prayer then lists a number of horrific ways by which people might die. It asks “who by water, and who by fire, who by sword and who by beast,” and so on. This prayer can come across as depressing and scary, but I love this prayer, because I think it is misunderstood. Its message is not dire, it is hopeful. It’s not actually about God sitting up in a cloud writing in the book of life. Instead its about how we acknowledge that there are bad things that will happen to us in our lives that we have absolutely no control over. We cannot predict them. And

when we cannot predict, we can hope. The last line of the prayer says that “repentance, prayer, and tzedakah will *ma’avirin et roa hag’zeirah.*” I say that last part in hebrew because it is often mistranslated. Many prayer books say that those three things, repentance, prayer, and tzedakah will lessen the severity of God’s decree, but in reality, in reality it means that they will transcend the severity of God’s decree. They will serve as our remedies to moments of grief. Fixing our relationships with people we love through repentance, giving tzedakah to communities that make us part of something greater than ourselves, and creating a personal spiritual practice whether that be prayer or not, these are the lights that will guide us through our darkest moments. They are the tools we have to give ourselves hope.

The last thing I want to say about hope tonight is how we treat it as a commodity. We use phrases like we have lost hope, or that something has given us hope. We speak of hope as if we have some quantifiable amount of it, and depending on the situation, that amount goes up or down. I understand that these are metaphors, but what if we took those metaphors seriously for a moment. What if we actually believed that we could lose our hope, and find it again? How might we change our behavior if we knew we were affecting someone else’s hope?

There has been so much recently that has caused me to lose hope. The inability of our country to have a civil discourse in political theater, the killing of a protester in Charlottesville by a Neo-Nazi, even the destruction caused by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. These things have brought pain and suffering to countless people. And yet, in the aftermath of these events, the goodness of humanity still shines through.

When three days ago at a Pro-Donald Trump rally in Washington DC, the leaders of that rally gave a group of protesters from Black Lives Matter the microphone to voice their dissent in the name of the freedom of speech for all. That action goes so far to repair the divide in this country. That teshuva, that fixing, gives me hope.

When after the tragedy in Charlottesville, the clergy of that town and surrounding ones came together in voices of prayer, not violence. Voices of love, not hate, that prayer gives me hope.

And after Hurricane Harvey, rescue workers went door to door to save people, putting their safety and lives at risk to help others, giving completely of themselves, a true act of Tzedakah. And while they were doing this, no one was asked who they voted for. No one was asked whether they support the president or not. The response to Hurricane Harvey gives me hope because ordinary people like you or me were defiant of the thought that politics could divide our humanity in a time of crisis. These are the things that give me hope.

They give me hope because they show the power of faith, compassion, and acceptance in times of darkness. They give me hope because they tell me that our future will be better.

This is my hope for all of us this New Year. That we can continue to give hope, to have our hope restored, and to act in a way that secures a better future. May we live with this blessing in the year to come. Shana Tovah