

To Seek Hope
Rosh Hashanah, 5780
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Just last Thursday afternoon, I came across a young homeless man at the corner of Broadway and West 4th in New York's Greenwich Village, his head in his hands, sobbing audibly; he was seated cross-legged on the concrete sidewalk with his back against the building which houses Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the seminary of the Reform Movement, where I serve as faculty to rabbis and cantors to be. I made a split second decision to stop and talk to him. Pausing for a moment to assess my own safety, I knelt down slowly to a squatting position. We were eye-to-eye, and I felt my ankles and knees take the strain of my own weight, against my suede dress shoes. "Can I call someone for you?" "No," he said between the sobs. "Can I help you go to a shelter?" "No," he said, without looking up. "How about the hospital?" I tried a few more questions along the same lines. He just cried, never lifting his face from his hands. Needing to make my train, I stood up and walked up Broadway toward the subway at Astor Place.

Almost immediately, a cascade of questions flooded my thoughts: what motivated me to stop and offer help *today*? Did my offers to help him actually *do* anything? Not that I saw. Did I stop because he was young? Maybe. Would I have stopped if he had smelled worse? Probably not. Would I have stopped if he hadn't been crying? Not sure. The questions raged on; I was curious---what drove me to offer help?

Upon further reflection, I realized my maternal instinct was probably triggered by sounds of someone crying. Moreover, the fact that he was leaning against the building where I work brought it so close to home. But that still didn't completely explain why I stopped. The more I sat with it, I realized that as a clergy person, I'm often called to counsel those in crisis. I'm accustomed to being with someone who is crying out in pain--even traumatic pain. When I had paused in front of this young homeless man, wondering what help I could offer, I realized, in that moment, I felt something else deep stirring inside me. I felt **hope**.

What does it mean to have hope? Does having hope require a naive belief that everything is going to be okay? Does having hope mean everything will be okay if only we do X or Y?

Writer, historian and activist, Rebecca Slonit, writes in her book *Hope in the Dark*, that “[hope] is not a belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction. The hope I’m interested in,” she writes, “is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities.” Or, to put it in more immediate terms, to take in the whole picture and act in a way that seeks a meaningful impact.

Yes, hope is about a *specific possibility*. It does *not* mean *all we wish for* is possible. It means a particular outcome within a given scope *may be* possible. Slonit continues: “Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. ... hope should shove you out the door ... hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope.”

For me, hope is a motivating force which allows us to **face** misfortune; to act in the presence of suffering or the fear of loss. Hope cannot fix misfortune; rather, hope enables us to function within an otherwise devastating framework. Our own Jewish tradition would remind us that hope is at the core of who we are.

Consider the greeting “Shana Tova.” A good year. It is a statement. It is a proclamation. But it is more than that. Just saying Shana Tova, is a prayer, it is a hope, a wish for the well being of another. It represents our commitment to a vision of a better future. And even more than that yearning, it may even be seen as an act of defiance.

For in spite of all evidence to the contrary, we are committed to the vision of a Shana Tova, a good year. And despite rampant suffering and injustice, the world has much goodness to it--outrageous goodness even. Deeds of heroism beyond our wildest imagination. Breath-taking miracles. Babies born into the world every second. The beauty of nature, the resilience of the human spirit, hands touching hands and hearts touching hearts.

Moreover, Judaism actually *commands* us to act in a way fueled by hope. We are not permitted to hope from the sidelines, or to hope without action. We must participate in that most holy of tasks: *tikkun olam*, repair of our

world. We Jews believe that it is our mission to repair this world that is in such need of healing. We call Rosh Hashanah “*Yom Harat HaOlam*,” the birthday of the world. As part of that birthday, God created us, human beings, to be God’s partners in the holy act of creation. Our most creative act is *tikkun olam*, to do the work that helps repair the brokenness of our world.

Yet, we are not meant to be saddled with all of the work of repair. In Pirkei Avot, or Ethics of our Fathers, Rabbi Tarfon reminds us that ours is not to complete the task, but neither can we run away from it or turn our heads and ignore it. There is so much to do, much of it so basic we can start right now. Begin by looking people in the eye. If you take the time to truly look, you will see the divine spirit dwelling there, in every human being. The task of repairing our world is overwhelming. So many problems. But hope means believing that particular problems can be solved.

And it is this world, despite its tragedies and despite its horrors, that holds out the hope that indeed, *bayom hahu yihiyeh Adonai echad*, one day the world shall be one and we will all know that we are all children of the same God.

Perhaps it is no surprise that the anthem of the State of Israel “*Hatikvah*” means “the hope.”

For this world, despite its tragedies and despite its horrors, is filled with beauty and filled with wonder. “O world,” we say with Edna St. Vincent Millay, “I cannot hold thee close enough! World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!”

Yet, even with this utter beauty; there is pain and distress. During this past year we have seen an unprecedented rise in Anti-semitism both here and abroad. It is terrifying as swastikas appear across cities near and far. And for some time now, we have seen the crisis at the US southern border where children have been separated from parents, suffering in unsanitary conditions. And according to the United Nation High Commission on Refugees, there are as many as 70 million displaced persons in the world right now (many of whom lack rights to education, health care, employment, and freedom of movement) more than any time since WWII. Though we may have differing opinions on the primary causes or how to

address such a crisis, we can agree that the suffering is prolific and inaction is immoral.

The great 20th Century philosopher and rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel taught "...Who is a Jew? A person whose integrity decays when unmoved by the knowledge of wrong done to other people." Yes, we are meant to be moved, then to hope, and then to act.

Years ago, I served as Director of Education at a small congregation (much like Shir Ami) just outside of Chicago in the suburb of Wilmette, IL. One morning at Religious School, a well-meaning second grade teacher asked her students to bring in toothbrushes to donate on behalf of victims of a hurricane. Her intention was to teach the students responsibility for *tzedakah* (righteous giving or repair of the world), but I remember feeling bothered by her request. Collecting toothbrushes, while a worthy impulse, was an act that would end up creating more work and offering less help than the teacher realized. It was unlikely that those 14 toothbrushes would get into the hands of those in need without the support of a partner organization. What does it take to get 14 toothbrushes, overseas, through customs, on a truck over washed out roads, and into the hands of 14 people who have many pressing needs including (but above and beyond) oral hygiene? Having done or observed aid work myself in Cameroon, the Dominican Republic, and Indonesia, I can tell you that effective social action projects (especially disaster relief) require a partnership with a local organization or with contacts on the ground in country (who will know whom to call when the truck breaks down, or quite frankly whom to bribe when the gate isn't open) and who can advise if toothbrushes are in fact needed to begin with; there may be a greater need that we hadn't even realized. When hope moves us to action, let's make sure that our action truly serves those for whom we offer hope--that it is the right specific possibility.

Friends, let's do the deeper work of social justice. Let's find out first through research how our work can have maximum benefit to those in need. Let's partner with organizations which have a footprint in the community; we can then amplify and respond to the voices of those in need. (And if those partner organizations tell us they need toothbrushes, then we'll collect toothbrushes!) Of course, we also wish to carry forward the important projects Shir Ami has long been involved in, such as our holiday gift drive which provides gifts to people in our own community who live in group homes who don't have families around, who may receive no presents. This

act, this partnership with the group home, and the love it represents, in and of itself, gives me hope.

Soon our social action team, co-chaired by Wendy Nadel and Peggy Sturman, will be sending a survey to get a sense from you what is on your minds--what keeps you up at night and what issues might we want to address as a congregation. Once we have that data, we'll get to work and determine ways we can have the greatest impact within a particular scope, and within our own sphere of influence. Let's do what writer Rebecca Slonit reminds us: to have broad perspective, with specific possibilities.

You know what gives me hope:

This is Hope: 17 year old Charlotte, North Carolina teenager, David Ledbetter, registered people to vote while they waited in line at Popeyes fast food restaurant. Ledbetter also incidentally co-founded a non-profit called "Imagine This" which works to prepare young people for college and careers.

This is Hope: Greta Thunberg, a 16 year old Swedish activist who spoke with fierce passion to the US Senate and to the United Nations on the devastating effects of global warming.

This is Hope: the Street Business School of Africa, co-founded by my own aunt, Torkin Wakefield, which teaches business skills to women in developing countries so they can launch new businesses and transform their lives; the Street Business School functions in 10 countries across the African continent reaching over 2000 women.

And what about me? Where is hope in my unsuccessful outreach to that young man on the street? I hadn't the faintest idea of who he was, or how I could help. He rebuffed my offers. And yet only through trying to connect can the specific possibilities we imagine even have a chance to become realities. And even if my attempt didn't yield fruit, perhaps an act of kindness paves the way for the next person to go a step further. That is my hope.

This Rosh Hashanah we yearn for leaders in our society who can fill our hearts with hope. There is so much cynicism, so much despair, so much anger,

but the key to true leadership is hope. We crave the dreamers, the visionaries, the passion and the love that come from daring to see the world as it can be at its best.

Ha-yom t'am-tsei-nu, God. This Day Strengthen Us. Give us hope in our hearts and vigor in our hands and a lift to our feet.

Ha-yom t'am-tsei-nu, God. This Day Strengthen Us, that the New Year of 5780 be the beginning not only of hope in our hearts but of the faith to see our greatest hopes come true. Amen.