

Perhaps There is Still Hope – Rosh Hashanah 5782/2021
Rabbi Yael Ridberg

One of the founders of West End Synagogue my previous congregation in New York City was a disciple of Mordecai Kaplan – The Honorable William Benjamin Melman z”l. He was a devout rationalist, never kissed the Torah when it would process in the sanctuary, but was a loyal member of the ritual committee, sometimes to a fault.

Every year he would protest our observance of Tisha B’Av – the saddest day on the Jewish calendar when we recall the destruction of the Temples on the 9th day of Av, and many other terrible events that befell the Jewish people. Bill’s ritual magnum opus was a paper outlining why he felt that commemorating the 9th of Av should not be a day of mourning, but rather, a day of celebration because Rabbinic Judaism emerged as a result of this tragedy, and we are inheritors of that tradition. “Jewish life as we know it would simply not exist if the Temple had never been destroyed!” he would exclaim.

Bill argued that had the Jewish people not had some degree of hope for the future, as sad a day the 9th was, the truly remarkable day was the 10th of Av, because the Jewish people didn’t lay down and die after those catastrophes – they redefined themselves and resurrected the community from within.¹

He quoted the prophet Jeremiah who taught that despite the exile to Babylonia, the people were to build houses to live in, eat the fruit of their planted gardens, marry off their children, and “*ravu sham – lo timatu!*” Multiply there and do not decrease.² The people were to not just enter the future despite its uncertainty, they were to anticipate with hope what was yet to be.

The Jewish people in particular know how to turn catastrophe into possibility, and crisis into opportunity. It’s a pattern in Jewish history from which we might draw strength and comfort.

¹ This sermon was inspired by two sessions this summer at the Rabbinic Torah Seminar of the Shalom Hartman Institute. *The Dawning of Hope* with Melilah Hellner-Eshed and *The Day After - Rebuilding Judaism After Catastrophe: A High Holiday Sermon Seminar* with Rabbi Ed Feinstein inspired my thinking and writing tremendously, and I am grateful for their scholarship.

² Jeremiah 29:6

As we mark our second Rosh Hashanah in the midst of the pandemic, we are once again asking for the sources of hope that will inspire us to remember in the words of Lamentations: *Hasdei hashem ki lo tamnu...* Divine compassion has not ended... *Ulai yesh tikva...* Perhaps there is hope.³

Rabbinic Judaism was born of a crucible, emerging in the aftermath of the destruction of the second Temple. The pages of the Talmud and midrash are filled with haunting descriptions of personal tragedy and communal devastation⁴ and the capacity to rebuild and renew with hope. It was only and precisely *because* of the destruction of the temple and subsequent exile, that the pages of the Talmud were even written.

When we consider one of the most beloved teachings in Ethics of the Sages in its context, we might have a clue as to their mindset. *Al shlosa devarim haolam omed* – On three things does the world stand - *Torah, avodah, gemilut hasadim* – Torah, service, and acts of kindness. A remarkable and simple teaching, but consider the destruction of the Temple as a backdrop: the priests murdered, the sacrifices upset, the altar desecrated, the city of Jerusalem in flames, and blood in the streets, the people come to Shimon bar Yochai and say, “What do we do?”

And he says: *haolam omed*. The world still stands. The Temple may be gone, but the world still stands - now on three *new* institutions, new convictions, new ways of living in community: Torah, service, and compassionate deeds will replace the sacrificial system of the Temple,⁵ and will become the new essential narrative of Judaism.

As we begin to emerge from the challenges of the last 18 months – that admittedly has not yet ended - what is *our essential* narrative that we will tell, that will open opportunities to reconceive our reality, inspire people to build their lives, eat the fruit of their planted gardens, marry off their children, and instill hope for the future?

This coming May, I will receive an honorary Doctorate of Divinity from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. It’s impossible to express how it feels like

³ Lamentations 3:22, 29

⁴ BT Berachot 5a-b, Hagigah 5a-b, Gittin 55b-57a, Eicha Rabbah

⁵ <https://www.hartman.org.il/rebuilding-judaism-after-catastrophe-a-high-holiday-sermon-seminar/>

yesterday and a million years ago since I became a rabbi. For the last 25 years, when I approach these sermons, it's never easy, but somehow, I have found my voice year after year.

This year was different. The enormity of what we have all been through was paralyzing: The pandemic, the rise in antisemitism, the election, the January 6th insurrection and the lack of accountability, and continued racial injustice. The arrival of the Delta variant and the relentless surge of misinformation about vaccinations and COVID in general, were each enough to elicit *dayenu*, it would be enough to send me to bed and invite you all to have “DIY” High Holy Days.

I experienced a kind of writers' block that was unfamiliar. It turns out I was not alone. Thankfully, my colleague, Rabbi Rachel Barenblat found herself in a similar situation and wrote: “It's hard not to despair. How can I write sermons from this place? I'm pretty sure no one comes to High Holy Day services to hear the rabbi admit that she's given up hope.”⁶

The psalmist offers: “*luley he'emanti lirot b'tuv adonai b'erezt chayyim*” - “Oh, that my faith was such that I could see divine goodness in the land of life.”⁷ These are, after all, the days when we will read about our biblical ancestors whose own despair necessitated divine intervention to see what was right in front of them to move forward.

“To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair,” teaches the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l. “Every ritual, every mitzvah, every syllable of the Jewish story, every element of Jewish law, is a protest against escapism, resignation or the blind acceptance of fate.”⁸

And so, *Hineni*, here I am, and I clearly have something to say. Once again reminding myself, and by extension, all of you, that the core message of Judaism is as offered in Lamentations: *Ulai yesh Tikvah – perhaps there is still hope To remember.*

⁶ <https://www.ipost.com/judaism/rabbis-should-offer-hope-on-the-high-holidays-what-if-i-cant-opinion-676010>

⁷ Psalm 27:13

⁸ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-the-jewish-people-invented-hope/>

In the ancient Israeli city of Acre, Evan Fallenberg, award-winning author and translator, bought a 300-year-old, Ottoman ruin, and turned it into an exquisite palace that is called Arabesque – a boutique hotel and artists’ residency. The hotel also includes properties owned by others - both Jews and Arabs, as Acre is a mixed city of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. It became part of the community in the town’s Old City, attending to weddings and funerals and iftar after-the-fast meals during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

On the night of May 11, 2021 in the midst of the latest conflict between Israel and Hamas, an angry Arab mob was attacking the city of Acre, and the Arabesque’s doors were breached. “Every piece of glass, ceramic or porcelain that could be broken was smashed, furniture was dismantled, mirrors shattered, televisions and air conditioners ripped to pieces. The 95-year-old grand piano was turned on its side. Enormous potted trees in the courtyard were broken, the soil beneath them scattered. Sinks were cut in half, electrical appliances in the kitchen bashed in, art on the walls flung in every direction.”⁹

Fallenberg recounted that the next morning neighbors stopped by in disbelief, weeping over the destruction, lamenting the violence. He left the doors open so passersby could see what had happened: “I wanted people to see and acknowledge,” Fallenberg wrote, “I wanted us all to imagine what it must have been like while it was happening, and mostly I wanted something to snap in people, to make them want to act so that such a thing would not, could not, happen again. Not to me, but to our society...”¹⁰

In the days to follow, the outpouring of support and love and encouragement from around the world and — most notably — from his Arab friends and neighbors changed everything. From everywhere, Fallenberg and his son heard: We will clean up with you. We will donate. We will rebuild what has been destroyed. We will stay in the hotel when you reopen. The community could not let Arabesque become a ruin again – because that would mean admitting Jews and Arabs could not live together. For so many people that was not a possibility.

Ulai yesh Tikvah – perhaps there is still hope to rebuild.

⁹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/arab-jewish-violence-israel-threatens-coexistence-my-neighbors-i-won-ncna1267982>

¹⁰ Ibid

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev was once asked: what is the right spiritual path, that of sorrow or that of joy? He replied: there are two kinds of sorrow and two kinds of joy. When a person broods over the misfortunes that have come before him when he hides in a corner and despairs of help, that is a bad kind of sorrow. But the grief that comes when a person knows what he lacks or has lost is honest and good.

The same is true of joy. One who chases empty pleasures never sensing their lack of inner substance, is a fool. But one who is truly joyful is like a person rebuilding her house after a fire. She feels the need deep in her soul, and with each stone that is laid, her heart rejoices.

The lesson of the parable is clear, for we too are like the person rebuilding her home after a fire. We are trying to find equilibrium, remember what life before COVID felt like, refining our communities, rebuilding our sense of safety, and reinventing our very lives.

Hope resides in the experiences that, while on the face of them are difficult and even devastating, they retain a sense of possibility for the future.

My sister Sara Lev is a teacher in Los Angeles. For years she has taught the 4-5 yr olds in the Transitional Kindergarten class at a charter school and brings Project Based Learning to classrooms that enables kids to really imagine their own experiences and learning in powerful ways.

Last year was decidedly tough. For 8 months she would thoughtfully consider how to make online learning engaging. When her students laughed during zoom school, “It made her feel better – better about having to teach them through the little gridlines on her laptop, better about having to ask them to repeat things 17 times if their internet connection was unstable or glitchy, better about teaching their 2-dimensional selves in a 3-dimensional world.”¹¹

When she was finally able to be in person with 9 weeks left in the school year,

¹¹ https://www.earlychildhoodpbl.com/blog/dear-tk-rainbow-builders-to-my-class-on-our-last-day-of-school?fbclid=IwAR2GXX5ri9dGpaOGYWnM7t8e2L-SL1kZCAF4PPha9SSAg_ER5GynOvLwwno

after only a few days in person she reflected that those children were “more whole, more real, more complex” than any other group of students she’d had in 16 years in the classroom.

Sara decided that the final project of the year would be the creation of a garden. They got to dig in the dirt next to their friends, they shared shovels and took turns investigating with a magnifying glass, and admired paintings of plants that the kids made, sharing about their experiences together.

She reflected to her students that *they* were like the seeds they planted. After all, *kindergarten* means a garden of children: Beautiful, 3 dimensional, whole, amazing humans with so much growth still to come in their roots as well as their blossoms.

Ulai Yesh Tikvah - perhaps there is still hope to renew.

This year we have lived through the pandemic of 1918, the economic collapse of 1929, and the political unrest of 1968. No wonder we are exhausted. We might be tempted to ask, when will “normal” resume? The truth is, we’re not going back to normal. We have been changed. Crises like the ones we have seen in the last 18 months reshape us – and we have the potential to become the examples of resilience and hope for another generation down the road.

Hope reminds us to live. In the words of Shaun and Abigail Bengson, *hope comes from the place where the hurt comes*. It seems so simple, but I don’t think we really think about living lives of meaning until we are confronted with such staggering losses.

Hope lives in our capacity to *remember*.
Hope is found in our courage to *rebuild*,
Hope thrives in our determination to *renew* ourselves in the face of whatever changes we must make.

This past year challenged every aspect of our lives. So how is this moment, this new year, an invitation to hope again? We return to the text of Lamentations for insight: *The kindness of divinity through humanity has not ended. Every morning*

divine expressions of grace and mercy are possible. The Power that Makes for Hope is our portion.

Ulai yesh Tikvah – there may yet be hope.¹²

Shanah Tovah u'metukah –

May the new year bring sweetness, joy, and abundant hope.

¹² Lamentations 3:20-32