

Yom Kippur 5781
Jewish Hope and Chutzpah
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.

She graduated first in her class at Columbia Law School but didn't receive a single job offer from any law firm. Why? The late Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Zichrona Livracha, said, "I had three strikes against me: one, I was Jewish. Two, I was a woman. But the killer was I was a mother of a four-year-old child."

The interview host followed up: "You graduated first in your class. Didn't that say something about your ability to be both a mother and the best?"

Ginsburg answered, "It should have."

Never underestimate the supreme power of Chutzpah. Ginsburg knew that these mountains blocked her path - unfairly of course. But that didn't stop her from pushing forward because she had hope.

Jewish hope is actful thinking, not wishful thinking. It's active, not passive.

This year, more than any in my lifetime, we are in dire need of hope. Because the Coronavirus has crushed us: us as individuals and - without exaggeration - the world.

I'm not going to list the pandemic's frightening toll because it's so familiar and so depressing.

And yet, I have hope, Jewish hope, that next year will be better than last year.

Hope is in our metaphoric Jewish DNA; it's the national anthem of the Jewish people. Literally! Israel's national anthem is called "Hatikvah" which means "the hope." Because the State of Israel does not come into being without millions of Jews for thousands of years in hundreds of countries ending their Passover Seders with the same three words: "*LShana Haba'ah Biyrushalayim* - Next year in Jerusalem." Jews may have been kicked out of Jerusalem for 2000 years, but we never stopped dreaming about our return. Never stopped acting on that vision. Never stopped highlighting Jerusalem in our prayers. Never stopped turning our feet and our hearts toward Jerusalem for every prayer service.

Jewish hope is not merely assuming that things will improve just because we want them to, or because time will pass. But wouldn't that be nice?

Jewish hope is the product of three responses: reason, action, and Chutzpah.

The first piece is reason. Jewish hope acknowledges the immense challenges with clear eyes, addresses them head-on, and unflinchingly finds a way to overcome. Just like the Halutzim pioneers who moved to pre-state Israel, who knew they had to literally drain swamps before they could plant fruit groves.

These days we continue to face daunting challenges with the Coronavirus. We are familiar with its dangers and understand that the fall and winter may be even harsher than the present. Dr. Anthony Fauci, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director, said the following this month: "If you're talking about getting back to a degree of normality which resembles where we were prior to Covid, it's going to be well into 2021, maybe even towards the end of 2021." This is because even if an effective vaccine is developed in 2020, it will take months to manufacture and distribute it, followed by more months to vaccinate most Americans.

I'm not minimizing these very real obstacles. And yet I have hope that he is right, that in one year - next Rosh Hashanah - we will see each other live and not live-stream. That there will be face time and not just Facetime.

Now don't get me wrong: I'm not making a promise or even a prediction, as I'm not a prophet. If I were a prophet, I would have bought stock in Zoom last year! Today I'm just sharing with you my hope and why I believe it.

The second process in Jewish hope is action. I am hopeful because what we really need most - a vaccine and treatment - are in humanity's hands.

A couple months ago, when the pandemic was relatively fresh, I was speaking with someone and we were talking about how challenging things were. She made the comment, "Well, it's in G-d's hands, right?" And I responded, "Actually, I think it's in *our* hands." I don't think she saw that coming from a rabbi! But I believe that G-d gave people minds to imagine and hands to create in order to complete the world.

"It's in our hands" means we've got to literally wash our hands to minimize its spread, along with wearing masks and keeping physical distance. This is what we must *all* do. "It's in our hands" also means that people have the ability to potentially - and hopefully - create a vaccine. I am

reassured because the whole world is working toward this. According to the head of the World Health Organization, there are currently almost 200 vaccine candidates in different phases of testing. Dr. Fauci believes we will have a vaccine by late this year or early next year, and I am encouraged by his optimism.

Our tradition provides a map for dealing with challenges, on both a personal and a global level. Faced with adversity, we the People Israel should follow the footsteps of our Patriarch Israel. Our ancestor Jacob faced his own existential crisis. After forming a family up north, he returns to Canaan where he learns that his brother Esau is marching toward him with an army of 400 men. Recall that last we heard, Esau wanted him dead for stealing their father's blessings. Terrified for his life, how does Jacob respond?

He does three things in Genesis Chapter 32. First, he divides his family and animals into two groups, thinking if one set is attacked the other will be spared. Second, he sends lavish gifts to Esau in order to appease his brother. These two practical steps mark all Jacob can do with his *hands*.

But Jacob doesn't stop there. Third, he prays to G-d. I paraphrase: "G-d of my fathers, You have been endlessly kind to me. Please save me from this danger. Please remember the promise You made to keep me and my family well." This prayer marks all Jacob can do with the *heart*.

The takeaway for us is that Jacob responds to challenge with *both* the hands and the heart.

And so should we. The hands: we should be relentlessly practical, as we follow the best medical advice. And the heart: we should also embrace the spiritual. We should pray to G-d that those who are ill recover; we should pray that our loved ones, along with those brave men and women who stand on the front lines, remain healthy and strong; and we should pray that one or more of these vaccines comes to fruition. Like Jacob, we should do all we can with our own abilities, and then seek help from G-d with the rest. We trust in our own abilities, but we are not so arrogant to believe we can face every task without help. We turn to G-d as the ultimate Source of help.

The third and final element of Jewish hope is Chutzpah. The word just makes you smile, right? I saw a cartoon about this: a guy is in a bookstore and he brings up a book to the cash register. The customer says to the employee, "I'd like this book on Chutzpah, and I want you to pay for it!"

From Torah times through today, Chutzpah has gotten the Jews far. Our patriarch Abraham famously challenges G-d when G-d speaks of destroying the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham retorts "*HaShofet Kol HaAretz Lo Yaaseh Mishpat?* Shall the Judge of the

earth not do justice?” (Gn. 18:25). Calling out G-d for being a hypocrite, like Abraham does - that’s Chutzpah. Because Abraham has *hope* these cities can turn it around.

Our ultimate leader Moses confronts G-d after the Golden Calf incident, when the Jews worshiped an idol soon after G-d freed them from Egypt. G-d plans to destroy the Jewish people and start over with Moses. Moses urges G-d to forgive the people or else, “*Mheni Na Misifrecha Asher Katavta*. Erase me from the book You have written” (Ex. 32:32). Telling G-d to change G-d’s mind or else quitting, like Moses threatens - that’s Chutzpah. Because Moses has *hope* that the Jews can get it together.

The early Zionists also had Chutzpah in their genes.

In 1881 Eliezer Ben Yehuda arrived in pre-state Israel seeking to revive Hebrew from a thousands-of-years-old language of study - like Latin - to one of daily conversation. That’s Chutzpah. Because he had *hope* that his people - our people - could actually talk to each other. He succeeded and Hebrew was rejuvenated.

In 1909 a group of 66 families stood next to the ancient city of Jaffa. Literally standing on desolate sand dunes, they divided up lots for a new community. That’s Chutzpah. Because they had *hope* they could take this old land and make it new. They succeeded and Tel Aviv thrived.

In 1948, the Jews announced their independence in the face of imminent war from local Arab militias and five neighboring national armies. That’s Chutzpah. Because they had *hope* that they could make their 2000 year old dream come true. They succeeded and Israel was reborn. Not born, reborn.

Hatikvah, Israel’s national anthem titled “the hope,” has quite a story itself. It rejects the past and imagines a radically different future.

You’ll recognize this line from Hatikvah: “*Od lo Avdah Tikvateinu* - Our hope is not yet lost.” The words articulate the incessant desire to return home to Israel. These words are based on a verse in the Bible, from the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones. Ezekiel Chapter 37 contains a famous - and puzzling - scene: in front of Ezekiel, G-d takes scattered, dry human bones and pieces them together in an act of resurrection. This represents how G-d will take the Jews - forgotten for dead - and revive them before returning them to Israel.

Listen to how the word “hope” is used in the following verse: “Then [G-d] said to me: ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; indeed they say: “Our bones are dried up, and *our hope is lost*”’” (Ez. 37:11).

“Our hope *is* lost. *Avda Tikvateinu.*” The resurrected body - representing the people Israel - speaks these words of despair to Ezekiel. Despite this miracle of renewed life, the Jews lack faith and have no hope. “Our hope *is* lost. *Avda Tikvateinu.*”

That's Ezekiel the prophet. 2500 years later, Naftali Herz Imber is a poet who in 1878 drafts what will become Israel's national anthem. Imber hears the echoes of this verse...and rejects it. He takes the words “Our hope *is* lost” and flips them to say “Our hope is *not yet* lost. “*Avda Tikvateinu*” becomes “*Od lo Avdah Tikvateinu.*” Changing a verse from the Bible - that's Chutzpah. But it was fueled by *hope* that modern Jews could overcome their painful past.

We Jews are the people of Chutzpah, which, when combined with reason and action, generates hope.

I am hopeful that the end of 5781 will be much better than where we are today. First, reason: I say this because we can identify the great challenges before us. They are daunting but not a mystery.

Second, action: It's in our hands. There is much we can do ourselves, in following medical guidelines. And there are brilliant minds working as we speak to develop a vaccine. Dr. Fauci's optimism about this reassures me.

And third, Chutzpah: my people - our people - have again and again faced long odds, clung to hope despite bleak odds, and succeeded. Chutzpah involves outrageous ideas, yes. But today I highlight Chutzpah's other element: tenacity. Obviously, the epic challenge of the pandemic is not just Jewish but global. Though *we* haven't experienced this before as individuals, I am heartened that people in every generation have overcome immense obstacles. They knew - and we should take to heart - that one day things *will* be better.

I understand the feeling we may now have of despair and anguish. I get it because I feel it too. It's real. But lift your heads up, and don't be disheartened. *Hazak Ve'ematz* - be strong and courageous. Recall that the Jewish people are ones who take defeat and reject it, who take a Biblical verse and invert it, who believe in hope so much that we make it our national anthem, HaTikvah.

Next year at Beth El.

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