

Let Hope Be Our Guide

Sermon Erev Rosh Hashanah 5785 by Rabbi Michael Schwab

Shanah Tovah. There is a legend that has been passed down through the generations which took place over two hundred years ago in a small European town where mysteriously all of the clocks and watches of the town stopped working on a single day. Puzzled and distressed, the people of the town did what they could to try and repair all of their timepieces, but *none* had real expertise in the workings of all of the cogs and gears that clocks and watches utilized in that time. *Years* passed until one day a traveling watchmaker entered the secluded town. News quickly spread, and there was so much excitement that a line developed outside the inn where the man was staying, as people brought their precious family timepieces to him, in the hope that they would finally be repaired. However, one by one the townsfolk emerged disappointed – the years had apparently taken their toll on their timepieces and the inner mechanisms had rusted *beyond* repair.

But *one* woman emerged with a smile on her face and a ticking timepiece in her hands. The townsfolk surrounded her to find out how the watchmaker had been able to fix *her* clock and not theirs. She explained: “When all of our clocks stopped working I did not want to give up on believing that mine *could* function once more. So each morning I wound the dial on my clock as if it might begin to tick again, *hoping* that it would one day return to keeping time. The clockmaker explained that because I took this *action* each day the parts inside never rusted from disuse and thus my watch

now works”. The woman’s simple but pure act of hope ensured that her clock would ultimately once again tell time.

A second story: Rabbi Hugo Gryn, a Holocaust survivor, originally from the borderlands between Czech and Ukraine, shared a story about the winter of 1944 when as a teenager, during the Holocaust, he was forced to live in a concentration camp grotesquely named Lieberose – Lovely Rose. One day his father announced to their barrack that it was the eve of Chanukah. So he took out a homemade clay bowl and began to light a wick immersed in his precious, but now melted, *single* ration of margarine. Before he could recite the blessing Hugo stopped his father and protested, “Father, we *need* the food. We can’t afford to *waste* it on a candle.” His father looked at Hugo – and then at the lamp – and responded, “You and I have seen that it is possible to live up to three weeks without food. We once even lived almost three *days* without water; but you *cannot* live, not even for three *minutes*, without hope.”

Several kind and sensitive people have approached me over the last few weeks to sympathize with me in a sweet and concerned way. They have said, ‘Rabbi, it has been such a tough year, I can’t imagine the burden of trying to find the right words, the right message, to deliver to so many people on such important days for the Jewish people. It must be very challenging’. And indeed, in some ways it is. It has been an emotionally draining and stressful year. And the situation is overwhelming and complex. What is more, the conflict in Israel continues, and the threat of Antisemitism persists. It is not as if this challenging time period is now in the past. On the *other* hand, in some ways, finding the right message for tonight was *not* particularly difficult

for me at all. Because the most fundamental answer to what we need is clear: it is **hope**. Not “*mere* hope” which is just a flimsy desire that everything will somehow work out. But ‘*true* hope’, expressed as a value, which states that in order to persevere and achieve our dreams, we need faith in an ultimately better future, a faith that our ancestors have held since the time of the Torah, and a faith that has carried us forward against all odds in *every* generation that has come before us. For *true* hope allows us to *act*, to act *as if* the future *will* be better, allowing us to aim higher than our emotions tell us to aim and, therefore, to make better decisions to ensure a brighter future.

Faith in the *future*, true hope, allows us to succeed in the *present*. Hope allows us to see that the patches of light in the darkness *will result* in the coming of the dawn. Hope allows us to share that light, to spread that light, in our hearts and to all who need it most. Hugo’s father knew that for survival, hope was more important than even food or water, because without hope there could be no future. And the attitude of hope expressed by the woman from the village, allowed her to *act* in such a way that made her future *tangibly* brighter - to achieve a dream that at one time seemed impossible.

The author Brené Brown once wrote: “Hope is a function of *struggle*—we develop hope not during the easy or comfortable times, but through adversity and discomfort.” In other words, it is precisely during times like this that we have to *actively* maintain our hope. It has been a year of adversity for our people, between the attack on October 7th, the hostages that remain in captivity, the bombardment in the north and the rising antisemitism in the world. Too easily we can become despondent and thus our hopeless attitude not only leaves us in a negative emotional place but also affects our

behaviors and choices, causing us to lower our aspirations and try to “just get by”.

But **hope** can raise not only our spirits, but our *eyes*, to see that the future can still be bright. And *acts* of hope do not have to be large or grand, but as small as winding a watch or lighting a candle. Small successes during challenging times *develop* our sense of hope, because, apropos to the theme of the High Holidays, in doing so we witness that *change is possible*, that there *can* be progress, that we have the *power* to affect our future. As Brown further teaches: “hope is learned . . . Children with high levels of hopefulness have experience with adversity. They’ve been given the opportunity to struggle, and in doing so they learn *how* to believe in themselves and in their abilities.” Hope is something we must actively cultivate and when we do, hope can be a *transformative* force.

And for us as Jews, history has proven that cultivating hope is indispensable to our welfare. In fact, renowned Rabbi, Yitz Greenberg, often says that hope is the greatest gift the Jewish people have given the world. We are a religion built on the very *idea* of hope. Like Sarah, our matriarch, our Torah is filled with stories of women who are too old to have children, who *nonetheless* hold on to the dream of motherhood, and achieve it! And how about our most foundational narrative, the story of *Pesach*. When the Israelites were finally freed from slavery, it was after 400 years of back-breaking labor, centuries of endless tears. We *should* have given up. Logic tells us that things should have only gotten worse. Still, the Israelites continued to hope. They *believed* things would get better. And that belief

carried them through *400* years of servitude and through leaving in the middle of the night with only the clothes on their backs. That hope led Nachson to walk into the Sea of Reeds up to his neck until the waters miraculously split, saving them from the oncoming Egyptian army. And that hope carried the Israelites through the seemingly endless wanderings of the wilderness. Hope. No plague or burden took that away from them. No enemy, or hatred will take that away from *us*.

In an article commissioned by the National Institute of Health entitled “Hope and Optimism as an Opportunity to Improve Mental Health”, written by researchers, Carlos Laranjeira and Ana Querido, they analyzed a recent and large longitudinal study among older adults exploring the potential public health implications of hope for our wellbeing. Outcomes revealed that “a greater sense of hope was associated with: better physical health and health behavior. For example, people who expressed hopeful attitudes showed reduced risk of mortality, fewer chronic conditions, and fewer sleep problems. On the other hand they *positively* evidenced *higher* psychological well being, illustrated by increased positive affect, life satisfaction, purpose in life and better social wellness”. The article established that it is , “well known that expectations about the future directly influence the subject's wellbeing.” In other words, formulating a hopeful attitude is endorsed as an important component in leading a happier, more productive, and meaningful life, according to both our ancient tradition *and* modern science.

In fact, hope has *always* inspired our actions as Jews. For example, the book of Proverbs teaches us that a definition of a righteous person is one who falls down seven times and always gets back up to pursue the right path.

Living our best life is not about the blessings we receive, but it is about our ability to get back up after a fall because we believe the future will be better. *HaTikvah*, the national anthem of the State of Israel, which literally translates to “The Hope” declares ‘our hope is not yet lost, the 2000 year old hope, to be a nation free in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.’ The words of this anthem are so powerful, as our generation is living the fruits of that hope, enjoying in real time the modern miracle of the establishment of the state of Israel. And, what makes the words even *more* powerful is that Naftali Herz Imber wrote this text in 1878, while facing persecution and pogrom in Ukraine. He wrote it 70 years before this hope was realized and at a time when his dream seemed near impossible.

During these *Yamim Noraim*, these days of Awe, we begin every day, and conclude every evening, reciting the words of Psalm 27. “*Kaveh el Adonai - Hope* in God. Be strong. Take courage. And **hope** in God.” In the weeks leading up to this day, and to this new year, we reaffirm every morning and every evening our hope that life will indeed get better when we stay true to our values and our tradition. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, “Judaism is a religion of details, but we miss the point if we do not sometimes step back and see the larger picture. To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. *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. Judaism is a sustained struggle, the greatest ever known, against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet. There is no more challenging

vocation. Throughout history, when human beings have sought hope they have *found* it in the *Jewish* story.” The world that we seek may not come today, or tomorrow, or even be fully realized in this new year of 5785, but nonetheless, *Kaveh El Adonai, chazak v’yametz libecha v’kaveh el Adonai*, We hope in God. We will be strong. We will be courageous. And we will always act to bring forth the bright future we will one day achieve. *Shanah Tovah!*