Hope is not enough

Dr. Avraham Holtz, who is unrelated to me, tells this story: In the very early years of the State of Israel, he went there on sabbatical. When he had found an apartment and moved in, he registered with the municipality to have a telephone installed. A week went by, two weeks went by, a month went by, and still no one came to install a phone.

He went down to the office, and asked if they had lost his application. The bureaucrat looked up his name in the records and said: “No, we have your name and your application right here.” Dr. Holtz said: “In that case, when will I get a phone?” The bureaucrat looked in the records again, and said: “There is a long waiting list ahead of you. My guess is that you may get a phone in about a year or two.”

Dr. Holtz was shocked. He said: “Do you mean to say that I can’t get a phone any sooner than that? Eyn Tikvah?” (Is there no hope?)

The bureaucrat closed his books and looked at him. He said: “Adoni, asur layehudi lomar eyn tikvah. Tikvah yesh – efsharut eyn.” My dear sir. It is forbidden for a Jew to say there is no hope. “Hope” there is; “possibility” there isn’t.

Three years ago –RH 5789 – in a time of anger and polarization, I spoke about hope. I told you that there were good reasons to be hopeful about the future of our congregation, about the increasing size of the Rivertowns Jewish community and also about our country. Three years later, I believe it even more strongly. It’s just that, for 18 months or so it has been quite a bit harder to look past where we are and into a brighter future.

It’s easy to be despondent or fearful - or angry, as I said last night. We are dealing with Covid, which would be more than enough, but at the very same time we face increased acts of antiSemitism, threats to women’s right to control their bodies, even more political polarization… And let’s not forget global warming. Part of us cannot wait to get back out into the world, and part of us wants to just hunker down, bury our heads in the sand, and, like the ostrich, think that what we refuse to see won’t be able to affect us. It can be tempting, to play the ostrich. But, of course, it doesn’t work. And anyway, as you may know, the ostrich is not kosher; denial and despair are not how Jews are taught to face the world.

It seems somewhat counter-intuitive though, doesn’t it? In light of the many tragedies of Jewish history, if any people could be forgiven for losing hope, it would be us. But we never have, or at least not for long. Jews have, against all odds, pretty consistently maintained hope in a better tomorrow.

At this very moment, it may seem as though it takes an extraordinary amount of strength to have hope. And yet I am reminded that every generation faces its unique challenges. Each moment in time presents its own difficulties, some large and some small. It always takes a certain amount of courage and strength to remain hopeful. But that is what Jews do.

This is, after all, why we come to High Holyday services. We hope and we believe that this period of *teshuva*, of returning, reorienting, and repenting will be effective.

When we ask of God, “*s’lach lanu* - please forgive us,” these are not empty words. Whether we personally think of them as literal or as metaphor, either way they are not empty words. They are hopeful words. They are expectant words. We would not come here to pray if we had no hope. And we are just the latest of so many generations, perhaps, as I tell the *b’nei mitzvah* families, perhaps 160 generations since we received the Torah, we are just the latest to stand before God with the firm hope that forgiveness will come to us so we may start afresh in a New Year.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jews always hope. Some have said that we actually have no choice. The prophet Zechariah, speaking to the exiled Israelites who had just been granted permission to return home from Babylonia, said,   
“ שׁ֚וּבוּ לְבִצָּר֔וֹן אֲסִירֵ֖י הַתִּקְוָ֑ה - *Shuvu levitzaron, asirey hatikvah”* - Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.” (Zechariah 9:12). It’s an odd phrase, to say the least – Prisoners of hope. It might mean, “prisoners who now have hope,” as though they had received a parole that was unexpected. Perhaps. I think it may go deeper. I think that when Zechariah referred to the Israelites as prisoners of hope, he was telling them that through all the years of exile they had never lost hope in the possibility of return because they couldn’t lose hope – they were spiritually unable to lose hope. In this sense “Prisoners of hope” is a positive phrase, reflecting an intensity of feeling akin to the phrase, “prisoner of love.” Jews are prisoners of hope. Yes, we all have moments of despair. But ultimately, we have no choice: we believe, we dream, we hope.

In 1977, on the eve of peace negotiations with Egypt, the young Israeli singer and songwriter David Broza and the poet Jonathan Gefen wrote a song that immediately become and still remains an anthem of hope: Yihyeh Tov – “it will be better.” It is sung as a simple statement of fact: things will get better. The chorus acknowledges that it’s not always easy to feel that way:

ויהיה טוב

יהיה טוב, כן

לפעמים אני נשבר

And it will be better

it will be better, yes

though I break down sometimes…

Broza ends every concert with this song, which was actually the first song he wrote, and he says that he will keep singing it as long as there is a need for it. Over the ensuing 40+ years, Broza and Gefen have added many verses to the original, each reflecting the political realities of the moment. He never sings all the verses, because, he says, it would take all night. But the most well-known verses are the original ones, and none more well-known than this one:

“We will yet learn to live together

between the groves of olive trees

children will live without fear

without borders, without bomb-shelters

on graves grass will grow,

for peace and love,

one hundred years of war

but we have not yet lost hope.”

In Hebrew, that last phrase, “but we have not yet lost hope” is “od lo avda hatikva.” It is an echo of the Israeli national anthem, entitled, of course, Hatikvah – the Hope. Broza sings “od lo avda hatikva.” The national anthem says “od lo avda tikvateinu” – our hope is not yet lost. The full phrase in Hatikvah is: As long as within a heart, the soul of a Jew is yearning, and toward the edges of the East, an eye gazes towards Zion, our hope is not lost.

But here is the most important thing to know about Hatikvah, something which I have told you before and I hope you will remember. The Romanian poet Naftali Hertz Imber was moved to write the poem Tikvateinu, Our Hope, not from a general sense of Jewish optimism. He wrote the poem, one verse of which would later be set to music as the Israeli nation anthem, in response to a small news article that astounded him.

In 1878, Imber read in the paper that for the first time in hundreds of years there were going to be Jewish farmers working the land of Israel. These pioneers were going not to the Old City of Jerusalem, not to the holy city of Safed, in fact not to any established community at all. These Jews had purchased land not far from the Mediterranean Sea, with the intention of establishing an agricultural community to be called “Petach Tikvah – The Gateway to Hope.”

Imber was both surprised and inspired by the idea that, rather than waiting for Elijah to announce the coming of the Messiah, Jews would take matters into their own hands to begin rebuilding the land of Israel, and in so doing, to transform and revive the entire Jewish people. Hoping is something that Jews have always been good at. But acting to make that hope a reality was, in 1878, something we had not really done much of in close to 2000 years. Imber was excited by the idea of action, and he used the name of the new community, ‘The Gateway to Hope,’ as the seed of his poem - Tikvateinu. Hope inspires action, and action inspires hope.

This is the lesson that we Jews have relearned over the past two hundred years. Hope is mandatory. But it is not enough. We are called upon to use the strength which hope gives us to act, to do whatever we can do to improve our own lives, and ultimately, the lives of everyone else as well. None of us can fix everything. Every one of us can fix something.

Most years at the Holydays I dedicate one of my sermons to what I perceive as a burning social justice issue, and I suggest a few ways that each of us might help begin to fix it. I do this in part as a response to Elie Wiesel’s insistence that “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.” I believe that one of the tasks of the Jewish people is to help repair the world. Not hope the world gets better, but act, through both word and deed, to make it so.

It is, as we all know, usually easy to say and harder to do. It is particularly difficult in a year like this when even the hope seems harder to come by. In a year like this, we have to start small.

The story is told of a student who came to his rabbi in tears. “I feel so paralyzed. I have tried so hard to repair the world and it does no good – it’s just hopeless.” The rabbi embraced his student and said: “There is always hope. Before you can change the world, you must repair your nation. And before your nation, you must repair your community. And before your community, you must repair yourself. Begin with yourself, and know that then you will have begun to repair the world.”

This is why we have the High Holydays: so we can begin to repair ourselves. Yes, the world needs our help, and our Tikkun Olam committee has many ways for you to take action. For the next ten days though, let’s focus on ourselves. What can we do better? What relationships need attention? What change do I want to see in myself by next Rosh Hashanah? There is always hope for us, if we are willing to identify the issue and take action to change.

It has been said that “Hope is the fuel which empowers us to build the life we want.” May our prayers during these Holydays lead us to agree with that clerk from the phone company, who said, *yesh tikvah,* there is most definitely hope. And may our prayers lead us to disagree with his declaration of impossibility. May we instead say it most definitely is possible, Yihye Tov, that things will be better. May we share God’s confidence in our ability to multiply goodness and blessing in this world. And may we, with hope and action, create a year of meaning and blessing for us all.

1. based on ideas from Robyn Fryer Bodzin [↑](#footnote-ref-1)