

“The Mitzvah of Hope”
Yom Kippur Evening, 5769
Temple Ohabei Shalom, Brookline, Massachusetts

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From an early age the news has been an important part of my life. It is true that as a very small boy, I, like many others of my generation would retreat upstairs to watch cartoons while my parents remained in the living room to watch the local news followed by the Nightly News with John Chancellor. But a few years later, having memorized every episode of the Flintstones, I began to join my parents for what soon became a nightly ritual of news-watching, sometimes punctuated by our own discussions and opinions. The news in my family was what Red Sox games may be to yours – a ritualized engagement in which your own life gets entangled with the fate of players you have never met, but somehow get attached to, as you cheer them on in a struggle against their rivals.

The news was exciting, too, because, in the epic struggles of the 70s and 80s, there was no shortage of heroes and villains: The United States and Iran. Israel and the Arabs. The Free World and the Communist Bloc. It was also exciting because most of the time we seemed to be cheering for the winning team.

So fascinated did I become with human events that at Tufts I chose to study history, politics and International Relations. Shortly after graduating, when the Berlin Wall was falling and one dictatorship after another was collapsing, I would devour two or three newspapers at a time, ingesting the details of every new development. Awed and thrilled by this tectonic shift of history, soon I found myself backpacking around Central and Eastern Europe, reveling in their freedom and wanting somehow to be a part of it all.

I still read the newspaper, but I do not watch the evening news much anymore. I suppose one reason is that I’m rarely home to catch it. But, more importantly, the news of the world has gotten increasingly hard to take.

The last year, 5768, was not an especially good one for the world. A resurgent Russia bullied three of its neighbors and waged aggressive war on a fourth. An authoritarian China stepped up its repression in Tibet and silenced dissent in Beijing with arrests, censorship and intimidation. The subprime mortgage crisis destabilized the global economy and threatened a worldwide recession. Bombings and shootings claimed hundreds of lives in Iraq, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Chinese cosmetics, food and toys killed or sickened scores of people and animals and frightened millions of consumers. Scandal engulfed senators from Idaho and Alaska and forced the resignations of a New York governor, a Detroit mayor and an Israeli prime minister. Gilad Shalit entered his third year of captivity by Hamas while Israel mourned the deaths of his comrades Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser. The 4000th American died in Iraq. Guantanamo prison remained open. The Pakistani president Benazir Bhutto was assassinated. The government of Sudan continued to sponsor genocide in Darfur. Health care became still less affordable. Iran’s president, Ahmadinejad,

pressed forward with his country's nuclear program and renewed his call for Israel's destruction. And the planet continued to get warmer.

The effects of all of this can be overwhelming to the mind and devastating to the soul. It can weaken our spirit. It can chip away at our hope. It can drive one to declare — as Job did after losing his family, his possessions, and his health “from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head”¹ — “I am disgusted with life.”² It can even cause one to withdraw in despair from the outside world, as Rabbi Yochanan did after receiving the news that his beloved companion, Resh Lakish, had drowned in a river.

Moreover, the onslaught of bad news can undermine our faith in the goodness of other people. Why did Jonah disobey his orders to go to Nineveh anyway? Because he was lazy? Far from it. Scared? I doubt it. No, I think he boarded that ship to Tarshish because the news reports he had heard about Nineveh were one bad thing after another. They left him pessimistic and cynical. So Jonah thought his trip to be useless because he thought his mission to be hopeless! Jonah gave up on the idea of teshuva — that people can repent and do better. “I’ll never persuade a city of more than 120,000 and much cattle to repent of their sins,” he must have thought. Jonah had lost hope. He had sunk into despair.

But the story of Jonah teaches us that despair and hopelessness were precisely the wrong response. Nineveh repented. Its citizens did teshuva. They were redeemed. Jonah's despair was also wrong because, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, despair is “the greatest heresy” in Judaism. Despair is a disease of the human spirit. It robs us of our ability to experience awe, wonder, and radical amazement. It deprives us of our faith. It attacks our sense of hope for a better world. It bleeds us of our idealism. It destroys any chance of effectuating *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world.

Some of you have had your own encounters with despair. The closest I came was two years ago. My father had already been hospitalized for three months when my sister called to say that my mother was being rushed into surgery for an emergency subtotal colectomy. When I arrived in New Haven about 12 hours later, I found my mother intubated with both feeding and breathing apparatuses, bloated to the point of being unrecognizable, and infected with a bacteria the doctors still couldn't get under control. For two weeks I seemed to live at Yale-New Haven Hospital, frustrated that even with the help of some of the best physicians in the world, my mother's body couldn't rid itself of its infection or get her lungs breathing well enough to be extubated. I spent my days shuttling between my father's room on the seventh floor, my mother's on the ninth, and the chapel on the first. From the doctors' faces, I could tell they saw little reason for optimism. They were losing a patient a week to this type of infection and perhaps this week's casualty would be my mother. Yet I never lost my hope. I was sustained by my faith and strengthened by the love and support of my friends and family. Once, while driving, my friend Annie prayed over the cell phone while I wept. Never had I prayed more earnestly or been more moved.

Finally, there came a day when the attending physician decided to chance extubating her and see if she could breathe on her own. She did, thank God, and that was the turning point of her

¹ Job 2:7

² Job 10:1

illness. A few weeks later she and my father were roommates in rehab. A few weeks after that she was strong enough to go home. My father came home a few months after that.

I do not know for sure what would have happened if I personally had given in to despair; if I hadn't drawn strength from our Psalms and from the loving support of family and friends. Most of all, I do not know what would have happened if I hadn't held on to hope. Perhaps the result would have been the same. But I know it would not have been better. Even apart from the result—because prayers aren't always answered—praying and hoping impacted the way I moved through adversity. They offered me sustenance, comfort and strength.

Hope is our tradition's answer to despair as well. It was the answer for Job who, having lost everything – his children, his possessions, his friends and even his argument with God – went on to rebuild again, to begin anew.³ It's an authentic Jewish answer, too, to the plagues and pestilences that we and our friends and families and neighbors face every day: cancer, AIDS, hunger, birth defects, intolerance, violence, pollution. What are the Race for the Cure, the AIDS Ride, the High Holiday Food Drive, if not expressions of hope?

As Jews, we must hope. It is our religious obligation. As Edmund Fleg said, "I am a Jew because at every time despair calls out, the Jew hopes." And as Heschel taught, "A religious man is a person . . . whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair."⁴ There's a good reason the national anthem of Israel is called *HaTikvah*, The Hope. Even through 19 centuries of exile, *Od lo avda tikvateinu*—we never stopped hoping. Never stopped praying. Never stopped longing for the land. Never stopped concluding our Seders with the wish, "Next year in Jerusalem." Until one day, The Hope became . . . The Reality.

Perhaps inspired by *HaTikva*, the Israeli musician David Broza wrote his own song about despair and hope. It has since entered my heart and the hearts of millions of Jews the world over. It is called *Yihiyeh Tov*--"It'll be all right." And here is my translation:

I am gazing out the window, I am stricken with despair,
Spring is no more; it has passed us; will it ever reappear?
And the prophet's called a jester while the clown's anointed king,
And although I've lost my way now, I remember how to sing.

Better times will come, better times will be,
Even though I may despair,
As the night descends, as the darkness falls,
Your presence draws me near.

Our children, clad in wings, fly off to The Defense,
But they return confused and weary in only two years hence.
People living in tension and seeking reason for release,
And between hate and retribution, they speak about "The Peace."

³ See Elie Wiesel's Nobel Acceptance Speech, 1986

⁴ *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 183.

And one day up there in the heavens, with clouds learning how to fly,
My eyes gaze upon an airplane very high up in the sky,
And inside are politicians dividing up the land,
Claiming what is ours and what is theirs,
Will an end ever be at hand?

Then the president of Egypt: "Behold!" for in walks he;
I am filled with exultation, as one can only be;
And we say, "Let's sign a treaty and live as brothers in our tents,"
But he says, "Indeed, let's do so; only leave your settlements."

I am gazing out the window wondering if this all is real,
And while murmuring my prayer, to give thanks I bend and kneel,
The wolf will yet dwell with the lamb, and the leopard with the kid,
But in the meantime hold my hand [God], as tightly as you ever did.

We'll yet learn to live together,
Between olive groves and fields,
Children will live without fear,
Without barriers and shields.

From the graves will spring forth
Flowers, paeans to love and peace.
Despite a century of warfare
Tikvateinu--our hope—shall never cease.

Better times will come, better times will be,
Of this I am aware,
As the night descends, as the darkness falls,
Your presence / keeps me / here.

I am gazing out the window.
Perhaps a new day will come.
Yes, yes it will.

Ken yehi ratzon.

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