

“Hope”

Rosh Hashanah Sermon

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A young lady was early for her flight so she decided to buy a book and a packet of cookies. She sat down at a table and a man came and sat across from her, opened his magazine and started reading. The woman opened the packet of cookies, took one out, and began eating. Without warning, the man across from her also took a cookie and began to eat it. The woman was astonished and angry. Each time she took a cookie, the man took one as well. When there was only one cookie left, the man pushed the packet across the table so she could take the last one. Flabbergasted and livid, the woman took her book and suitcase and stomped away to her gate. After she boarded the plane, she reached into her backpack to get her book and to her total astonishment she found her packet of cookies, untouched and unopened. The woman realized that they had been there the entire time. She actually had been eating the man's cookies and he had generously offered them to her even though they were not hers. While she was judging him, he was having compassion for her.

There is a Jewish version of this cookie story, which involves drinking glasses and a king. In it the rabbis teach us that we need both *din*, judgement, and *rachamim*, compassion, during this time of year. There was once a King who had thin glasses that he wanted to use to serve his guests drinks. “If I put hot water in these glasses,” the king said, “then they will expand and break. And if I put cold water in them, they will contract and shatter.” So what did the king do? He mixed the hot water with the cold water, and then put the mixture into the glasses. So too did God create humankind with both the attributes of compassion and judgement.

The midrash continues: “With the attribute of compassion alone, no one would be concerned.” In other words, if God was only compassionate we would never worry about our faults because we would never face consequences for our actions. However, the midrash says further, “With the attribute of judgment alone, the world would shatter from the harshness of justice.” If we look only with judgment on ourselves and others, then we create a rigid world that has no mercy and does not take individual circumstances into account. Therefore, when God created the world, God did so with both judgement and compassion, “and it stands firm.” Our world exists because we have both *din* and *rachamim*. These two powerful and essential forces are needed to keep it in balance.

Traditionally, at this time of year, we focus on God's *din*, God's judgment, and closely consider our faults. But I'm going to introduce a radical notion here. I think in this past year, 5778, we actually *did* spend a significant amount of time — too much time — focusing on what is wrong in the world. We have been living in the *din*, a state of judgment and often negativity. We have been obsessed with all that is wrong with our world, mired in a morass of helplessness. We feel powerless to change anything. I was recently at a dinner where we began the meal by having everyone say something they are thankful for. One woman opened her mouth, then stopped. She was speechless. She could not think of one single thing. The world was just too depressing to find anything good, she explained. Here she was at a beautiful, home-cooked meal with friends old and new, and yet she was so worried over the state of external events she could not appreciate any of that beauty.

Many of us feel the same way — we have spent so much time thinking and worrying about what is wrong in the world that we feel overwhelmed, unmotivated, powerless, even depressed. This year, instead of focusing on where we have gone wrong, let us face the new year by focusing on what we have done right. Let us face the new year emphasizing the value of hope.

Hope, or *tikvah* in Hebrew, has been a part of our Jewish story for thousands of years through wanderings and exile. Despite our history of tragedy and persecution, we have been able to find hope.

That hope is summed up in the story of almost every Jewish holiday. They tried to kill us. We survived. Let's eat. You have to be a hopeful people to find such joy in the midst of holidays and a history that seems to teeter on the brink of devastation.

This time of year is about change, but we do not need to focus on our shortcomings and have our guilt over our sins *push* us to change. Instead focusing on what we have done well can *pull* us towards our best selves and inspire us to change for the better. Hope builds more hope.

This time of year is a hopeful one. We end Yom Kippur on a joyous note. After chanting the Torah during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur morning in the haunting and somber High Holiday minor melody (or trope), on Yom Kippur afternoon we switch back to the hopeful major key for our Torah reading. This year, let's move from the minor key to the major key not just at the end of Yom Kippur but for the entire holiday period. Let's explore how our positive acts have helped create the world we want to see. Let us find hope is what is good and let this hope inspire us to do more in the year to come.

We can find hope in the Jewish mystics' story of creation. Isaac Luria, writing in the 16th-century, tells us that at the beginning of the creation of the universe, there was an outpouring of God's light into vessels. Some of these vessels shattered and some of those sparks of Godly light made their way to the earth and became trapped here. Our task, Luria teaches, is to raise up these holy sparks and reunite them with God--to pull light out of the brokenness. How do we gather these mysterious, invisible, elusive sparks? We gather them by doing *mitzvot*. When we study Torah, or feed the hungry, or give *tzedakah*, we restore some of this primordial Godly light to the world. When we visit the sick or speak out for immigrants or have a Shabbat meal with our family, we not only make our lives better, we also help to raise up the Divine Light.

Those of you who know me well know that mysticism is not my thing and that I do not often quote kabbalists on the bimah. But I find this notion quite powerful and hopeful in today's world and at this season. The problems we see in the world did not start two years ago or 50 years ago or 2,000 years ago. They started before we were even created. The brokenness we see today is not our fault; it has to do with God's light being scattered. We are not called upon to berate ourselves for the state of the world, but to do our best to reunite the Divine light with God by doing good. And each time we do a *mitzvah* we are participating in *tikkun olam*, a literal repair of the world. Our actions give us and others hope.

It is no accident that the shofar, the symbol of Rosh Hashanah, is a sign of hope. In ancient times, the shofar was sounded during the sabbatical and jubilee years. Every seventh year, the sabbatical year, loans were forgiven. After seven cycles of seven years the 50th year marked the Jubilee when land was returned to its original owners and slaves were released. When they heard the sound of the shofar, people knew they could hit "reset"; they had a chance to start anew. Let us reassert this ancient tradition and reimagine our three-part shofar service as hopeful rather than somber.

The first part of our shofar service, *malchuyot*, is traditionally about God's sovereignty over us. Let us instead look at our own sovereignty--the power we have to act and how our leadership can make the world better.

There is a midrash, a rabbinic story, about Miriam the prophetess, the older sister of Moses. When Pharaoh orders all Israelite baby boys to be killed, Miriam's father, Amram, feels hopeless and powerless. He divorces Miriam's mother, Joheved, and the other married men follow his example, thus dooming the Israelites to extinction—they will not have another generation of children. But Miriam, then just a child, still has hope. She stands up to her father and argues with him. She tells him that his decision is even more devastating than Pharaoh's decree because while Pharaoh would only kill the boys, Amram's example will prevent *any* Israelite children from being born. And, most importantly, Miriam argues that Pharaoh is wicked so God may not even let his decree stand; but because Amram is righteous, God certainly will honor his wishes. Miriam tells her father that his hopelessness has doomed the Israelite people. Amram sees the error of his ways, remarries Yoheved, and soon Moses is born, setting in motion the Israelites' redemption from Egypt. Miriam never lost hope, and she challenged the hopelessness that

she saw in her father. Her courage inspired her father to act.

We cannot wait for one person to magically fix all the ills we see in the world and march us to a better place as Moses did for the Israelites. But we *can* be like Miriam. *Malchuyot* reminds us that we can speak out for what is right, encourage others to take action, and keep hold of hope.

The second part of the shofar service is *Zichronot*, memory. Traditionally we recall that God remembered our ancestors and are assured that God remembers us as well. Let us instead remember that we are not alone. We are a part of a community. Just as we remember others, they remember us and this gives us hope.

There is a parable from the 19th century rabbi Hayyim of Zans about a man wandering in a forest. He walks for several days, becoming more and more hopelessly lost. He can not find the way out. Finally, on the third day he sees a shape approaching. Small at first and then larger as another person comes into view. His heart is filled with joy. "Now I shall certainly find the right way out of the forest," he thinks to himself. "Brother," he greets the other man, "tell me which is the right way out of this forest. I have been wandering for several days and I am hopelessly lost." The man replied, "Brother, I do not know the way out either. I, too, have been wandering for many days. I, too, am lost. But, I can tell you this. Do not take the way that I have been going; it will lead you astray. Let us look for a new way out together."

At times we can feel lost. We do not know the way and we worry that we are alone. *Zichronot* tells us that we are not alone. While we might not know the correct way to go, we can travel the road with others. Being with others, being in a community, gives us hope.

The third part of our service, *Shofarot*, recalls the sounding of the shofar at the revelation of Mount Sinai. Instead of that ancient shofar sounding, let us focus on the future shofar sounding. That which will herald messianic times. It gives us a hopeful vision of a future world overflowing with freedom, compassion, and justice.

Our prophetic texts paint brilliant pictures of these future times. Isaiah tells us that on the day of messianic redemption, "a great ram's horn, a great shofar, shall be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come and worship the LORD on the holy mount, in Jerusalem (Isaiah 27:13)." All those who are exiled outside the will be able to return once more. More metaphorically, all who are exiled or separated from their true selves will be able to come home once again; to live authentic lives.

Isaiah also tells us there will be a time when "They shall beat their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up Sword against nation; They shall never again know war. (Isaiah 2:4)" Would that it were so. It has not been so in our lifetimes or the lifetimes of our parents or their parents, but oh, the vision of that time.

The shofar sounds. People return to their authentic selves. The world returns to *shalom*, peace and wholeness and completeness. *Shofarot* gives us hope of the world that could be.

Malchuyot--We have the potential to change the world, to bring hope to ourselves and others. *Zichronot*--We are not alone, we walk the path together. *Shofarot*--We have a vision of a better time, we hope for that better world.

As we sound the shofar we move from the wholeness of *t'kiah*, one note, to the brokenness of *sh'varim* and *teruah*. But we always end with wholeness. We always go back to *t'kiah*. And, at the end, we sound *t'kiah g'dolah*. The long loud blast that gives us hope, pulling us towards our best selves and reminding us of the truths of the shofar service:

We can make change.

We are not alone.

We have a vision of what could be.

May our new year, 5779, be one of hope.