

Hope
Yom Kippur Sermon
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Introduction

Our mood last night was somber. We heard the haunting melody of Kol Nidre, we sang the traditional tunes and recited communal confessions. We looked at the brokenness in our country and in ourselves. For me, it was hard and painful. Hard to confess, painful to look within myself. It was sobering. That difficult work is part of what we do on Yom Kippur. Our introspection is supposed to be real. Being real with ourselves means sitting in the pain. However, we are also a part of tradition that does not allow us to sit in the pain forever. Hope is part of who we are as Jews. In the midst of catastrophe, time and again our ancestors found ways to hope. Without hope we would not be here today. In our Psalms we read, “One may lie down weeping at nightfall; but at dawn there are shouts of joy.”¹ We are assured “those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.”² Our Torah reading for this morning tells us, “Surely this instruction is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.”³ You have this, our tradition tells us. Things are difficult, but there is hope. We will embrace joy. We will be resilient. We will persist.

This morning, in my sermon, which will again be broken up into parts, I want to offer some rays of hope. And, I want to share the silver linings you wrote about. First, to note the person who says, “Zoom has allowed me to attend services and gatherings that I would not have been able to otherwise.” Amen to that! How many of you can only join us because we are on Zoom?

Several of you wrote about this beautiful new building and how happy it makes you. One person said, “This synagogue has a new home built on the love of the original one.” “A new home built on the love of the original one.” We begin our service with mah tovu, a prayer that praised the beautiful tents of the Israelites. Having a beautiful prayer space matters. So, as we sing Mah Tovuv on page 140 to a joyous tune I invite you to find something beautiful in your prayer space today. It could be a beautiful view out your window, or artwork, or even some sunshine. Please share that in the chat box. What makes your prayer space beautiful? We begin our service on page 140 with the singing of mah tovu.

Part Two:

“One of the most important distinctions I have learned in the course of reflection on Jewish history is the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope. Knowing what we do of our past, no Jew can be an optimist. But Jews have never – despite a history of sometimes awesome suffering – given up hope.” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks⁴

Rabbi Sacks invites us into a radical idea about hope. It is not about blind faith that things will get better. Hope is the belief that we can work to make things better. Optimism is passive—if we just wait things will turn out fine. Hope is active—we have to do work to make our world better. As we sit here on Yom Kippur, having confessed our sins last night and preparing to confess our sins again today, this active hope is empowering. We will not just sit around and pray for things to get better. We will spend our day in prayer, and then we will get up and work to make our broken world a little bit more

whole. Courage is not giving up. Hope is belief we can move the needle towards justice. Courage is doing that work, every day.

Part Three

We are about to read Yotzer Or, a blessing which marks creation. In our prayer book it says “Baruch atah Adonai, Elohainu Melech ha’olam” “Praised are you Adonai our God, the sovereign of all worlds, “Yotzer or u’voreh chosheh “ “Who fashions light and creates darkness” “oseh shalom u’voreh et hakol” “who makes peace and creates all things.” A beautiful beginning to our prayer today. But the original text, from the book of Isaiah, is different. It reads, “I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil.” What? Take a moment to think about if you like the original or the recreated prayer, but don’t answer just yet. Judith Plaskow writes that this alteration raises a question for us, “Do we want a liturgy that names the truth of our lives, however painful and difficult they may be, or do we want a liturgy that elevates and empowers, that focuses on the wondrous aspects of creation alone?”⁵ Are the mutually exclusive?

The rabbis of the Talmud discuss a world without the yetzer ha’rah, the evil inclination. They say that without that, we would never build a house, get married or have children. We have desires that we might need to reign in, but they are necessary to life. This is a hopeful stance. We are not looking to create a world free of anything bad. We do not have to create another Eden. There will always be difficulties in the world, even if we do not specifically acknowledge it in our prayers. Our job is to move us forward, a little bit, towards a more just world.

Many of you found hope in our steps towards justice. You found hope in the fact that “People have mobilized to repair the world.” And that all ages are “speaking out against intolerance,” “addressing racism,” and “educating themselves.” Hope is not perfection; it is making the journey.

Part Four

The first prayer in our Amidah is the Avot v’imahot. It traces the Jewish story back to our forbearers. Family is important and whether we were born Jewish or found Judaism on our own, we are part of a Jewish family that stretches back generations. This family, truth be told, has not always been the most functional. We read on Rosh Hashanah the difficulties between Sarah and Hagar, between Isaac and Ishmael. Nearly all of our Biblical ancestors are flawed. Jacob’s sons sell their brother Joseph into slavery. King David has Bathsheba’s husband killed so he can marry her. We could go on. Our ancestors are not perfect heroes; they remind us of real people with real struggles. That lack of perfection gives us hope. If our ancestors, who were so close to God, still went astray, then it is only natural that we will too. And, just as God forgave our ancestors, time and again, so too, God will forgive us.

While our biblical ancestors struggled in their family lives, many of you have found silver linings in yours. You had more time with your families and significant others and families grew closer. You fell in love. New grandchildren were born. You connected with relatives online. And, the joy of children gave you hope. One person found a silver lining in “the “WOW” of delight in our youngest grandson’s voice and eyes as he dances in puddles.”

Part Five:

As we prepare for our confessions, I want to return again to the idea of hope and optimism. Rabbi Stephanie Kolin gave a brilliant Rosh Hashanah sermon called Hope is a Participatory Virtue.⁶ I invite you to read the entire sermon, much of what I have said this morning is based on her ideas. In her sermon, Rabbi Kolin introduces us to the Stockdale Paradox named for the late Admiral James Stockdale, a former resident of Coronado, my hometown. Admiral Stockdale was a hostage during the

Vietnam War for seven and a half years. He said that the optimists were the ones who did not make it out. “They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart ... This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”⁷ He had faith he would get out eventually, but he confronted the reality in which he lived. Hope, Rabbi Kolin teaches us, is looking at the brutal truth and then finding a way to act. We see that our world is broken, we don’t know when it will be fully healed, but we take a step to make it better. We see that Covid-19 has upended our lives and changes the world. WE don’t know when, or if, we will get back to normal. But we act to make this situation better. That step, that action, is hope. Hope is a participatory virtue. We have to choose to act, and choose to believe that our actions will matter.

So, we come to our time of communal confession. We find so much comfort in community. You found silver linings in reconnecting with friends and neighbors. In meeting again after a long absence. So we confess together. We are realistic about the world in which we live. We are broken. Our country is broken. Our world is broken. And, after our confessions, after this awe-some day is over, we will find hope in the fact that Judaism has never said we must get rid of all that is bad. We will find hope that even our ancestors were flawed. We will find hope in our community and in the beauty of nature. We will find hope in the work we do together and we will find it is not beyond our reach.

¹ Psalm 30:6.

² Psalm 126:5.

³ Deuteronomy 30:11.

⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, <https://rabbisacks.org/topics/hope-vrs-optimism/>.

⁵ *My People’s Prayer Book: Volume 1*, Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., 1997, p. 53.

⁶ <https://uniontemple.org/2020/09/hope-as-a-participatory-virtue-even-now-especially-now-essentially-now/>

⁷ <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/what-the-stockdale-paradox-tells-us-about-crisis-leadership?fbclid=IwAR0I6Et6MBw6PtMWthITnJnQdEidXozmW0eoth8WJLRFg2Z2g9uPyAbrqTs>