

Rabbi Steve Segar's Rosh Hashana Message 5765

On Having Hope — The Mitzvah of Hope

Shanah Tovah and *Gut Yontif* to everyone. It is very gratifying and uplifting for me to be here with all of you today as together we begin our collective journey into a new sacred cycle, our 5765th according to traditional reckoning. And actually, where I'd like to begin this morning's d'var Torah is with the observation that so many of you are in fact here

It is no secret that a significant percentage of the American Jewish community is not affiliated with any type of Jewish institution, and that over half of America's Jews are in no way connected with a specific synagogue community. It is also no secret that among the population of Jews that are affiliated with synagogues, the vast majority, often for defensible reasons, choose to forgo attendance at Shabbat and other types of services throughout most of the year. These truths make it all the more interesting that in study after study, observance of the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur continues to rate very highly even with Jews who otherwise do not attend synagogue, and even with Jews who in general have no affiliation with the organized Jewish community.

So, what is it about these days that contains such power that so many Jewish people change their normal behavior and venture into the heart of the organized Jewish community? How do we account for this phenomenon?

Could it be, in the words of Tevya, "tradition", pure and simple? Or is it merely inertia, the force of habit developed over many years that cannot easily be shaken? Perhaps it can be understood as an attempt to make up for a lack of engagement at other times of the year? The problem with all of these explanations, besides their relatively negative bias, is that they fail to account for the unique status enjoyed by Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur among the broader Jewish public. They could in theory just as easily apply to any Jewish holiday observance and so they cannot really be compelling for us.

What I think truly draws people back into the orbit of Jewish language and ideas at this time of year, is the notion of radical hope and possibility that these days collectively hold out to us. No matter how stuck we may feel at whatever level of our lives, the message of this part of the calendar cycle flashes boldly before our eyes, that perhaps things can be different.

Even if we have lived through cycle after cycle of these holidays, while consistently being unable to achieve the kinds of personal changes for which we are aiming, there remains the still small voice that whispers "Maybe this time I will acquire the insight I need to truly transform myself, maybe this year I will find a way at last, to rectify that broken relationship, maybe this time I will really come away with a sense of having connected to holiness in some way, maybe this year . . .".

It is not the case that a sense of hope is absent from other parts of our sacred calendar, but it is true that every other holiday has a strong focus on a particular historical experience of the Jewish people and/or on a particular part of the agricultural cycle connected with the Land of Israel. These foci to some extent dilute the pure, unadulterated Days of Awe emphasis on the potential for growth at every level of human life, the individual, the communal, the national and the global.

This focus on the possibility of change and forward movement is deeply rooted in the history of our people's approach to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Throughout Jewish history and across the various schools of Jewish thought and practice, the expectation has always been that individuals would make use of the one month preparatory period during Elul to reflect on their own lives, do an accounting of their souls and begin to focus on whom they needed to ask for forgiveness and how they hoped to improve themselves in the coming year. In a word, to do *t'shuvah*.

But as we've said, these Days of Awe also functioned beyond the level of the Jewish

individual. After all, it was also understood to be the commemoration of the creation of the world, *Hayom Harat Olam*, as it says in the Musaf section of the Rosh Hashanah service. As such, it was clear to our ancestors that the processes of Divine judgment were at work not only among individual Jews, but among all human beings, as well as among the nations of the world including of course, the Jewish nation. It is not surprising then that the holiday liturgy as a matter of course contained prayers for the well being of the entire Jewish People as well as prayers for the well being of the human community at large. There was truly a sense that the arrival of our New Year had profound implications for the immediate future of all peoples of the world.

Since the advent of the modern period with its emphasis on questioning and the scientific method, there has been an understandable decline among many in the Jewish community in our ability and desire to view the Days of Awe as a period of time that impacts on larger historical currents. While the imagery of the book of life has remained meaningful either literally or metaphorically in relation to the individual, its power has receded dramatically in relation to the level of the collective.

The upshot of this cultural shift is that the sense of hope or possibility that I believe brings so many to High Holy Day services functions mainly for people in a personal way, and its effectiveness at stimulating reflection related to our identities as members of the larger human community has been reduced significantly.

However, at this moment in human history, I believe it is imperative for us to reconnect with the collective level of hope and possibility that is also a part of our High Holy Day legacy. There has not been a period of time since World War II when we have felt our sense of well being as threatened as we feel it is today. Clearly the terrorist attacks of September 11, three years ago, inaugurated a new phase of vulnerability for us as Americans, but also for the world as a whole.

While there was no shortage of tragedy and terror in our world prior to that date, it is as if everything that is wrong with us as a global community now stands out in a more starkly painful and frightening way. Here is my current short list: the ongoing horrors of the AIDS epidemic, the genocide in Sudan, famine on a global scale, the uncertain, complex and deadly military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq; the sudden and searing news of more civilian casualties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the heart rending murder of children along with their parents and teachers on the first day of school in a Southern Russian city, the terrible fury of yet another hurricane barring down on the southeastern part of our country.

The unavoidable questions arise:

How should we as Jews respond to this overwhelming collection of global catastrophes? And does our tradition provide us with the resources to retain any sense of hope as we struggle to figure out how to respond?

In order to begin to address these question, it is helpful to take a step back from present circumstances and examine the backdrop against which our people first came onto the canvass of history. Rabbi and scholar Irving Greenberg has argued in many places that our tradition is one whose very foundation is planted in the soil of hope and possibility. Our people's core narrative tells the story of a group of slaves who escape to freedom and our tradition sees that story as prefiguring a much larger and more complete redemption that is yet to come. Rabbi David Elcott explains in his book, *A Sacred Journey, the Jewish Quest for a Perfect World*, that in fact hope and possibility were the defining characteristics of early Israelite culture in contrast to the non-monotheistic cultural assumption that all beings, human and Divine, were ultimately subject to the ever repeating patterns of Nature and Society. From this perspective it is possible to argue that the Jewish people actually introduced hope into the world.

Accordingly, the giving up of hope or the denial of redemptive possibilities in our world, were seen as great transgressions by the ancient rabbis who categorically denounced even the slightest expression of such ideas in the strongest terms.

A classic but subtle example of this dynamic can be found in the traditional text of the Passover Haggadah, where the rabbis describe the wicked son as one who has denied the fundamental principle of Jewish belief, in other words, he has implicitly called into question the meaning and value of the Exodus experience, and by extension, the Jewish commitment to hope and possibility in the world. Conversely, the rabbis make it clear that nurturing a sense of hope is one of the most critical practices we can undertake as human beings.

This notion is most poignantly expressed in a Talmudic teaching about the five questions people are asked as they pass from this world into the next, one of which is "Did you hope for salvation?", which I would rephrase as, "Was the real possibility of the world being transformed truly alive for you?"

But the rabbis did not want us to wait until the end of our lives to discover the critically important role that hope is meant to play, they made sure that we would confront it whenever we attended a synagogue by placing the two most redemption oriented prayers, the *Aleynu* and the *Kaddish*, at the end of each and every service.

All of this, I believe points towards the Jewish duty, or in more traditional language, the mitzvah, of cultivating hope as we go through our days and through our lives. However, this hope that is to be cultivated is the farthest thing from being naïve or of the Pollyanna type. Our people's historical experience has been so saturated with violence and persecution that we are keenly aware of the pain and the sacrifice involved in holding out a vision of transformation and refusing to abandon it no matter how agonizing or difficult the obstacles we encounter.

It is in fact to the lessons of Jewish history that we can turn for another source of support to shore up our ability to hope as we encounter the challenges that life in the twenty-first century continues to present. Many Jewish communities of both the recent and distant past have lived through catastrophes, that in relative terms rival and even transcend the level of threat that we may experience in our contemporary context. In the words of one rabbi, "we have lived through terrible tragedy . . . yet our community has always refused to despair. The survivors of the holocaust, on being granted life, seized it, nurtured it and showed humankind that the spirit is indomitable. The existence of the Jew is an argument against despair, Jewish survival is a warrant for human hope." And of course, along with our ability to survive the worst that history had to hand us, there are the many examples of our people's ability to dream toward and achieve a vision, of which the creation of the State of Israel is one of the more recent and certainly most staggering examples.

There is indeed much in our collective memory and experience to strengthen and encourage anyone, who would resist oppression and dream of redemption.

And it behooves us, when we feel cut off from such encouragement, to pay attention to people like political philosopher Michael Walzer, who reminds us that our story and our sacred texts have nurtured many groups and individuals from outside of the Jewish world and inspired them to face and overcome difficult situations of their own.

Besides our people's historical experience, there is a deep well of Jewish teachings and practices from which we can draw in order to sustain an attitude of hopefulness. In connection with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we find a rabbinic teaching in Babylonian Talmud tractate Kiddushin, which asks us to consider the idea that each action we take can potentially tip the balance of the entire world either towards good or towards transgression.

From the mystical tradition, there is a related teaching that every human action has the potential either to redeem sparks of holiness from their material prison or cause them to be even more deeply embedded and entangled. Both of these teachings speak powerfully to the impact the action of an individual can have on a larger reality.

Interestingly, in both cases, the individual in question might very well be unaware of the impact he or she has created. One critical step then, in the reclamation of hope, is a renewed conviction that the little decisions we all make and the seemingly inconsequential

interactions that we all have every day are in fact the very building blocks of a long term vision of societal transformation.

Our reflection on hope could not be complete if we did not turn to the texts of the Torah readings assigned by the rabbinic tradition for these two days of Rosh Hashanah. In Genesis chapters 21 and 22, we read the stories of how Abraham is asked to place each of his two eldest children, Ishmael and Isaac, in situations that threaten them with death, but who at the last minute are saved by a seemingly miraculous Divine intervention. What struck me most strongly about these stories this year was in fact the central role that hope, even radical hope plays in each narrative. Within the context of each story, hope is connected to a desire for progeny and continuity, but on a more general level we can read these stories as being about hope for something that seems completely beyond attainment. More specifically the stories contain insights into the stimulation and cultivation of an openness to possibility, especially when this may seem unjustified.

How is this so? In both of the Torah readings there is a direct and immediate relationship between the return of hope to the protagonist and the ability to see things in a new way, or to perceive things that may have been present all along, but remained hidden due to the narrowed perception of the person in question. In Genesis 21, this person is Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian handmaid who has been exiled from Abraham's and Sarah's settlement and is wandering in the desert preparing for her own death and that of her son. In her deepest moment of despair, she receives an angelic communication that restores her hope and the text then goes on to say that "God opened up her eyes and she saw a well of water."

Similarly when Abraham is about to sacrifice his son Isaac as he believes he was commanded by God to do, an angel intervenes and Abraham lifts his eyes and sees for the first time a ram caught in a nearby thicket which he uses as a substitute for Isaac. In both of these texts there is no indication that object of perception, the well or the ram were not there all along. Therefore, the real miracle for Abraham and Hagar was the ability to see more clearly, to see beyond the blinders, that had previously limited them.

I think there is a clear implication from these stories for the challenge we are addressing today: If we are to take seriously our tradition's call to cultivate hope even in the face of significant evil and suffering, we must constantly practice the art of seeing as wide an expanse of life as we are able. Those images and experiences that are negative and horrific will, all on their own, jump out at us and scream for our attention, but that which is hopeful or redemptive in the world often has to be sought out with perseverance and sensitivity.

In a short while, we will all depart from this room having completed the initial spiritual exercise of this holiday period.

It is my fervent wish and prayer that we will all have the chance to think some about what it is exactly that brought us here to this Rosh Hashanah service today, and to the extent that the answer to that question has anything to do with finding hope, may we be able to increase our capacity, even in the most minutely incremental way, to tune into the angels who are whispering to us of our own hidden wells and rams. In so doing, we will acquire the ability to walk forward together, into our shared future, knowing that our resolve to remain hopeful is a possession that no person and no experience can ever strip away from us.

Once again, *Shana tovah umtukah!*

Rabbi Steve