

Hope in Our Hearts: *Erev Rosh Hashanah* Sermon 5776
by Rabbi Leora Frankel

Shanah Tovah, Happy New Year.

On this most sacred night, let me ask you an appropriately serious question: By show of hands, how many of you here are Mets fans?

The truth is, I am not the biggest sports fan myself. I try to at least know who's playing in the World Series and if I tune in for the Super Bowl, it's usually for the half-time show. But team spirit can be infectious, and between my brother and father, and the Mets actually doing well right now, I can't help but steal an occasional glance at the MLB scoreboard. (In fact, the last thing I did before I shut my computer down for the holiday was double check that the Mets beat the Braves!)

My father is the type of season tickets-holder who owns at least a dozen versions of the same blue-and-orange cap, including one that spells out *Mets* in Hebrew. He likes to joke that Mets is actually an acronym for "My Entire Team Stinks!" and we laugh that rooting for them is a very Jewish thing to do. Our own Jewish "team" also began as an underdog, suffered countless defeats, and yet kept at it. To be a Mets fan—or maybe a true fan of any team—requires patience, faith, and a whole lot of hope. On the aptly titled Mets blog "Fear and Faith in Flushing," the blogger writes, "Hopefulness is an occupational hazard of being a Mets fan [...]. Even when the Mets are hopeless, you are hopeful. Or you hope to be hopeful."¹ In this sense, being a Mets fan, being a practitioner of hope, can teach us something not only about sports, but also about these Days of Awe which we enter tonight.

¹ <http://www.faithandfearinflushing.com/2011/08/11/never-say-die-always-say-hope/>

Tonight, and for the next ten days, we imagine that the Gates of Heaven are swung open and that we stand before God in judgment. Through *cheshbon hanefesh* (“accounting of the soul”), we ask ourselves the hardest questions: “How have I fallen short this past year? Of whom must I ask forgiveness? Where do I want to be in my life a year from now?” Our tradition suggests that this spiritual cross-examination is practice for the ultimate Day of Judgment, when we die and literally stand at heaven’s gates. Rava, one of the great scholars of the Talmud, actually suggests a list of inquiries made by God as we each reach that threshold.² Most of them are concrete and their answers easy enough: “Did you deal honestly in your business? Did you set aside time for study? Did you engage in procreation?” Yet one of Rava’s questions is a curveball: “*Tzipita li’yeshua?* Did you hope for deliverance?” or as Ron Wolfson puts it, “Did you live with hope in your heart?”³

Now I can understand why God would care if I’ve had children or engaged in Torah study or had professional integrity. These are concrete accomplishments and reflections of some of Judaism’s core values: family, learning, economic justice. But what is so essential about having hope in my heart? How is that a measure of my life’s worth, my ticket to the World to Come?

Hope is a word we toss around often enough: “I *hope* the train is running on time this morning. I *hope* my child will get into such and such college. I *hope* to get that promotion at work.” But that’s not what Rava means when he asks, “Did you live with hope in your heart?” Hope is less of a wish list and more of an encompassing orientation towards life, a kind of faith in the future. The dictionary definition of the verb “to hope” reads, “to *want* something to

² Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

³ Wolfson, Ron. *The Seven Questions You’re Asked in Heaven: Reviewing and Renewing Your Life on Earth*. Jewish Lights, 2009.

happen or be true *and* think that it *could* happen or be true.”⁴ That second part of the definition is key—not only to wish for something but also to believe in its potential realization.

To hope is to conceive of things turning out different from how they might, to believe in the possibility of a positive outcome, often in the absence of any evidence. Like religion itself, hope is an irrational emotion, a *chutzpadik* impulse that others may say is ill advised or naïve. There isn’t always a scientific or historical reason to believe that tomorrow will be better than today. In fact, things sometimes do get worse before they get better. That’s why having hope requires that we take the long view. We simply never know when or how it might be fulfilled. Just the other day, one of our longtime congregants shared with me that her 67-year-old son has finally found his *bashert* and will be getting married this Thanksgiving weekend.

To be clear, having hope does not mean denying our current existence but rather defying it. Sociologist Peter Berger calls hope “a signal of transcendence,” something that speaks to us from beyond where we are.⁵ Hope is future-focused, forcing us to squarely face the facts of life and then seeing something past them. As such, hope is a uniquely human quality. Among all the species on earth, only *we* can think in the future tense, allowing our minds to inhabit a different reality than our body. Living with “hope in our hearts” entails a kind of dual-consciousness, where we at once dwell in the world that is and at the same time aspire to the world as it might yet be. And this is the very definition of what it means to be a Jew throughout the ages.

That sense of hope is what sustained our people through 3,000 of wandering, expulsion, and eventually return. Like a baton passed down through the generations, it was hope that emboldened Abraham to first follow God’s call and leave behind everything he knew, and hope that flickered to Moses from the burning bush, igniting our Exodus from Egypt. Hope produced

⁴ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hope>

⁵ Berger, Peter. *A Rumor of Angels: Modern and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. Doubleday, 1969.

our written Torah in Babylonian exile and transformed Judaism into a portable religion when the Romans torched the Second Temple. Through countless inquisitions and pogroms, through the horrors of the Holocaust, our ancestors held fast to hope and it nourished them.

Of course, there is no greater, more tangible manifestation of hope in Jewish history than the modern State of Israel. It is no surprise that Israel's national anthem is simply named *HaTikvah*, "the hope." What word could better capture the fulfillment of that 2,000-year old yearning to return our ancient homeland, a hope for Zion that was never lost through those millennia of exile and persecution? David Ben Gurion famously remarked in a 1956 interview, "In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles."⁶ For all the blood, sweat, and tears that were poured into founding the State of Israel, the sheer persistence of that hope, that *tikvah*, is as much a miracle as the 1948 victory itself.

The Hebrew word *tikvah* has its roots in the Book of Joshua, as the Israelites are finally preparing to conquer the land of Israel. When Joshua sends spies into Jericho, the King hears they are in town and sets out to kill them. So the spies take refuge in the home of Rahab, a "righteous" harlot. (I know, it sounds like an oxymoron... like "honest politician"! But this is what the rabbis call her.) In exchange for Rahab's protection, they promise that she and her household will be spared when the Israelites capture the city. And as a sign of her faith in that pledge, Rahab affixes to her window what the Bible calls a scarlet *tikvah*, from the root *kav*, meaning thread or cord. What a striking image, this ancient red string dangling at the mercy of the breeze!

Indeed, sometimes in life's most challenging moments, all we have is a thin thread of hope to hold on to. And sometimes, that is all we need to get through another day, as in a story the British Rabbi Hugo Gryn tells about his time as a boy in Auschwitz. One winter evening in

⁶ October 5, 1956 CBS Interview with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion.

the barrack, Gryn's father drew him into a quiet corner, explaining that it was the first night of Hanukkah. He watched in amazement as his father plucked a few threads from his prison uniform for a wick and lit them in the day's now melted butter ration. Then the boy became angry; how could they waste this precious food for a makeshift *menorah*? His father replied: "My dear son, you and I have seen that it is possible to live for a very long time without food. But Hugo, a person cannot live even for a day without hope."⁷

From Rahab's red string to a candlewick made from the threads of an Auschwitz uniform, hope seems to be something in our Jewish DNA. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief rabbi of the UK, goes even further, asserting that in a sense the "Jews invented hope."⁸ For the ancient Greeks, everything was fate; the future pre-determined by the past. But Jews believe in freedom, rejecting determinism in favor of human agency. As Rabbi Sacks powerfully puts it, "The Greeks gave the world the concept of tragedy. Jews gave it the idea of hope. [...] To be a Jew," Sacks teaches, "is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Every ritual, every mitzvah, every syllable of the Jewish story, every element of Jewish law, is a protest against escapism, resignation, or the blind acceptance of fate."⁹

The story of Rahab and the scouts in the Book of Joshua gives us the origins of the word *Tikvah*. But it's another, earlier spy story in the Bible that fleshes out its fuller meaning. We're more familiar with this tale from the Book of Numbers, when Joshua is not yet the great military general, but one of twelve young men sent by Moses to first scout out the Land of Israel. Ten of them come back completely discouraged. "It's true," they begin, "that the land flows with milk and honey. Its fields are so plentiful that it took two of us to bear this one cluster of grapes. But it is also swarming with giants and we could never defeat them." Only two of the spies, Joshua

⁷ As told in Rabbi David Wolpe's *Floating Takes Faith*, Berhman House, 2004.

⁸ Sacks, Jonathan. *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism and Israel in the Twenty-First Century*. Schocken, 2009.

⁹ Ibid.

and Caleb, pipe up with hope. “*Yachol Nuchal*,” they insist, “We can surely do it!”¹⁰ But their hopeful voices are far outnumbered, and so the Israelites are doomed to wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

I have always been fascinated by this Torah portion, not only because it gives us a first view of the biblical land of Israel, but also because of its glimpse into human psychology. Presumably the twelve scouts all looked at precisely the same stretch of land with its people and its produce. Yet ten of them came back consumed by the challenges that lie ahead while two remained optimistic, full of “hope in their hearts.” What is it that allowed Joshua and Caleb to return with their favorable report, to see beyond the pessimistic analysis of the other ten spies or perhaps to envision another reality completely?

Positive Psychology founder Martin Seligman teaches: “The defining characteristic of pessimists is that they tend to believe bad events will last a long time, will undermine everything they do, and are their own fault. The optimists, who are confronted with the same hard knocks of this world [...] tend to believe defeat is just a temporary setback. [...] Confronted by a bad situation, they perceive it as a challenge and try harder.”¹¹ In the story of the twelve scouts, only Joshua and Caleb are able to think about obstacles they see in the land as being temporary and relative. The other ten are too blinded by their own insecurities, remarking in self-defeat, “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so must have been in theirs too.” Transcending their fears to see that longer view, Joshua and Caleb maintain their faith and exemplify Seligman’s definition of optimism.

But Harvard professor Tal Ben-Shahar points out that we can’t expect ourselves to stay positive under pressure unless we have trained our brains in advance. In his recent book,

¹⁰ Numbers Chapters 13-14.

¹¹ Seligman, Martin E.P. *Learned Optimism*. Random House, 1990.

Happier and its companion *Even Happier*, Ben-Shahar suggests daily rituals to “practice positivity” so this becomes our default mode of thinking.¹² As with anything in life, he reminds us, practice makes perfect (or at least, as my mom always used to say growing up, practice makes better). The best way to cultivate optimism and hope, Ben-Shahar teaches, is to spend a few minutes every day focusing on gratitude, ideally writing down at least five items for which we are grateful in a journal each night.

This is more than just self-help pop psychology! It is real neuroscience: meditating on gratitude can actually reinforce neural pathways and increase the levels of dopamine in our brain that help us to feel happier and more hopeful in both good times and bad.¹³ And according to extensive research, those who engage in a daily gratitude practice are not only more likely to be emotionally resilient in life’s low moments, but also sleep better, work more efficiently, and be more generous. All of these positive developments begin with taking the time to recognize the good in our lives, even if it is merely the silver lining of an otherwise very gray cloud.

This practice of “recognizing the good, *Hakarat HaTov*” is actually the very first thing God taught humanity to do if you look closely at the story of Creation in Genesis. Beginning on the third day once the earth itself was formed, each day’s account closes with the same line, “And God saw that this was good.” And when the sixth day ended and God’s works of Creation drew to a close, an even more enthusiastic “it was very good!”¹⁴ So in the Torah’s very first narrative, we already have a model of *Hakarat Hatov*. I can imagine that in the void of an unformed world, even God needed some hope. Hope that God’s creatures would care for the earth and one another, that all of God’s efforts would be fulfilled.

¹² Ben-Shahar, Tal. *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*. McGraw-Hill, 2007.

¹³ For more on gratitude and the brain, see also Emmons, Robert A. *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

¹⁴ Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31.

As we look around our world at the brink of 5776, it seems that some of God's hopes, and perhaps some of our own, have been dashed. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the world's brokenness, to just throw up our hands and resign ourselves to the present reality like the ten scouts in Numbers did. But amidst all the depressing headlines of the past year, I am trying to practice gratitude and cling to small threads of hope—those moments that don't yet promise complete repair but which allow at least me to imagine a way forward.

There are so many examples, but I'll share just one. 150 years after the end of the Civil War and 50 years after the Civil Rights Act, our country is still plagued by institutions of racism. African Americans are still being beaten by police, gunned down in the streets and even in church sanctuaries. Yet I feel a little hope this week speaking with colleagues, like my dear friend Daniel Bar Nahum, who recently participated in the NAACP's Journey for Justice. Reenacting the 1965 march from Selma to Washington, 200 Reform rabbis took turns carrying a Torah on the trek in solidarity with the African American community and to raise awareness about the ongoing issues of economic inequality, education, and criminal justice reform. Like Abraham Joshua Heschel walking arm in arm with MLK in the original march, they "prayed with their feet" and give us all hope.

Hope is a very personal matter too for me, especially right now. Since last summer my father, that die-hard Mets fan, has been battling a terminal cancer. Do I wish that a cure would suddenly be discovered and save him? Sure, I sometimes have that fantasy. But I no longer think of that as hope, at least not the kind that helps us bear the burdens that I know each and every one of us in this room carries. The more modest hopes in my heart right now are that my father will not suffer, that I can fully appreciate whatever time we have left together, that I can

capture enough of his photos and stories and songs to keep his memory alive for my young daughter and myself.

And my dad himself continues to teach me about hope, his TV always tuned in to the latest Mets game, even if he is sleeping through it. This past week, as he slowly recovers from his second brain surgery, my mom knelt down, held his hand, and asked him how he was feeling. “Optimistic,” he said.

At first his response seemed almost laughable given recent rounds of bad news, and I was ready to chalk it up to the many pain meds he was on. Thinking about it more though, I’ve come to believe that on some deep level my dad really meant it. While my father has every reason to feel hopeless, somehow his indelible Jewish-Mets spirit keeps shining through the enveloping darkness. I know that whenever he reaches those gates of heaven, my dad will be able to answer with confidence that he lived with hope in his heart.

So on this Eve of Rosh Hashanah, with the Gates of Heaven open, let us take a few minutes of personal reflection as the music plays, to consider this question: What would it mean for *you*, in your own way, to truly live this New Year with hope in your heart?

Shanah Tovah U'metukah, wishing you a year of good health, of sweetness, and of hope.