

Turning Despair Into Hope
Yom Kippur Morning 2020 -- Rabbi Lily Solochek

A poem, by Adrienne Rich (from “Dreams Before Waking”):

What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other’s despair into hope?—
You yourself must change it.—
what would it feel like to know
your country was changing?—
You yourself must change it.—
Though your life felt arduous
new and unmapped and strange
what would it mean to stand on the first
page of the end of despair?

What would it mean to change our despair into hope?

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about finding hope through gratitude and resilience, today, I want to offer another path towards cultivating our hope on Yom Kippur. Let us start by imagining that hope is a choice we can make, and that each day we stand at a crossroads and we must make a decision to choose hope, to ‘choose life’ as the Torah says.

Coming into Yom Kippur places us at our own personal and spiritual crossroads. We confront the decisions of the past year and actively commit to being better in the coming year. The rituals of Yom Kippur take us out of normal time and routine: we wear white, a custom that both imitates the angels and imitates the day of our own death; our clothes themselves send a message that this is not a normal day. Many of us fast, either

from food or water or both, we deny our bodies the very things they need to survive for just one day. We say the second line of Shema aloud, aligning ourselves with the angelic choir, and stepping outside of being human for just a moment. By the end of the day many of us will feel tired, perhaps have a headache, and feel the pangs of hunger. We oscillate between feeling hyper-aware of the sensations in our bodies and feeling disconnected from our physical selves as we give our complete focus to our spiritual selves.

All of these practices take us out of normal time and being. Yom Kippur exists in its own special bubble of time and experience, as we look deeply into ourselves. The month of Elul and the ten days since Rosh Hashanah were time to account for our actions, to make amends, to apologize to those we've hurt. Yom Kippur is the time to look at what we've learned these past 40 days and make a plan to go forward. We stand at a crossroads, and make a choice.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, a master of the Musar, Jewish ethical practice, wrote, "When I was a young man I wanted to change the world. But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country. When I found I couldn't change my country I began to focus on my town. However, I discovered that I couldn't change my town, and so as I grew older I tried to change my family. Now as an old man I realize the only thing I can change is myself, but I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that in turn could have changed the country, and we could all indeed have changed the world."

Perhaps you are like Rabbi Salanter and want to change the world. His advice is to start with the self first. On Yom Kippur we begin this work through fasting, by physically enacting our guilt by striking our hearts and confessing aloud, and then committing to change. We start to change the world by first changing ourselves. We start changing ourselves by cultivating hope; hope allows us to imagine that change is possible.

If we look at the future and feel only despair, how can we possibly affect change? We have to keep that spark of hope alive so we do not become frozen into inaction or passivity. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “At the heart of Judaism is ... the belief in human freedom. We are what we choose to be. Society is what we choose to make it. The future is open. There is nothing inevitable in the affairs of humankind...” (*“Future Tense,” The Jewish Chronicle, April 1, 2008*). We cannot control the future, we cannot know what tomorrow brings, but we can control who we will be in that future. We can choose to build a society on the foundations of love and compassion.

Rabbi Sacks continues: “To be a Jew 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. Judaism is a sustained struggle, the greatest ever known, against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet.” Take a moment to consider Rabbi Sacks’ words: you could be anywhere else right now; perhaps you’ve had to take time off work to be here this morning, perhaps you’re missing school or something else important. But you showed up here, at Yom Kippur, to declare a belief in *yourself* that you can change for the better. If you had no hope in yourself anymore, if you had given up entirely, you wouldn’t be here in community pushing back against despair and declaring a better world is possible through the changed action of each of us. Judaism is a protest against accepting our fate.

It is never too late to change the future.

The moment we tell ourselves it’s too late, then it becomes too late. God calls us a ‘stiffnecked people’, let our stubbornness allow us to hold onto our hope even in the darkest times.

Yet sometimes our despair takes over. Sometimes the weight of the pain of the world can be too much to bear. In those moments, let our sorrow not be a barrier between

us and God, but rather let that brokenness be an open vulnerability to receive the love and compassion we need. In the words of the late Leonard Cohen,

“There is a crack, a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in”

Even when we're broken open or lost in the darkness, even that despair can be a pathway to hope. Receiving love and compassion in the midst of sorrow builds our resilience, it lets the light into our broken hearts.

Yom Kippur exists in this liminal moment between despair and hope. We make our confessions and leave them here in this limbo space so that we can move forward without them weighing us down. We speak our mistakes aloud to lift them from our shoulders and give us space to imagine a better version of ourselves. We choose hope, we choose to believe that something better is possible, that we can do better.

This idea is best illustrated by the words of the Piaseczno Rebbe, writing in 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto: “It is clear, amidst all this suffering, that if only everyone knew that they would be rescued tomorrow, then a great majority - even of those who have already despaired - would be able to find courage. The problem is that they cannot see any end to the darkness. Many find nothing with which to bolster their spirits, and so, God forbid, they despair and become dispirited. This is the meaning of "Be sincere with God." Even if you are broken and oppressed, nevertheless be guileless and whole. Take strength in God because you know that God is with you in your suffering.” (*Esh Kodesh, Parashat Shoftim, August 1941*)

I cannot imagine the darkness the Piaseczno Rebbe faced in the Warsaw Ghetto, and I cannot imagine the hopelessness that surrounded him. He understood that though we cannot often see the end to the darkness, we must push ourselves to find hope anyway. We must not give in to despair. And his idea of God speaks to me in this moment: ‘God is with you in your suffering.’ When our sorrow breaks us open, that’s how the light gets in. When our sorrow feels like too much, God has not abandoned us, God is next to us,

suffering alongside us. If we can experience love in a place of vulnerability, perhaps we can overcome our hopelessness.

We find hope when everything feels impossible but we insist that it is possible.

When the path before us isn't clear, the only thing to do is step forward.

Each day our liturgy recalls our ancestors leaving Egypt and singing the Song of the Sea, containing the words *Mi Chamocha ba'eilm Adonai*, who is like You, God? According to one rabbinic legend (*Mechilta DiRabbi Yishmael BiShalach*), when the Israelites found themselves trapped at the Sea, with the Egyptian army behind them, they argued about what to do and yelled at God and Moses for leading them into the wilderness to die. They fell into despair. One man, Nachshon, stepped forward into the sea. The water didn't part. He walked further in, singing the Song of the Sea. The water reached his hips, then his shoulders, but he kept singing and walking further in. Finally he reached the words "Mi kamocha" but the water had reached his mouth and it slurred into chamocha. He took one more step in, the water covering his head. And then the sea split.

When we find ourselves at the sea, the Egyptian army behind us, let us not bicker or despair as our ancestors did. When we find ourselves in the darkest times, let us take courage like Nachshon and step forward.

When there is no path before you, you make a path. Hope tells us that if we keep moving forward the Sea will eventually part. In the coming year, let us not allow despair to overtake us, let us instead always reach toward the light of hope.