

In the announcements you will find the first half of the text of a video by a 20-something year old young man named Jonathan Reed, a college student from Chicago.¹ The video addresses the question, what will your life be like when you reach the age of 50. It was made in response to an AARP contest to try to help them understand what kind of future people aged 18-30 see for themselves. I've only printed the first half of the poem - I'm going to read you the second half in a little bit, but first let's look at the beginning.

I am part of a Lost Generation
and I refuse to believe that
I can change the world.
I realize this may be a shock, but
"Happiness comes from within"
is a lie and
"Money will make me happy."
So in 30 years I will tell my children
they are not the most important thing in my life.
My employer will know that
I have my priorities straight because
work
is more important than
family.
I tell you this,
once upon a time
families stayed together
but this will not be true in my era.
This is a quick fix society.
Experts tell me
30 years from now I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce.
I do not concede that
I will live in a country of my own making.
In the future,
environmental destruction will be the norm.
No longer can it be said that
my peers and I care about this Earth.
It will be evident that
my generation is apathetic and lethargic.
It is foolish to presume that
there is hope.
And all of this will come true unless we choose to reverse it.

1. The video, which won 2nd place in the contest, can be found at
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42E2fAWM6rA>

At first, this looks like it was written by a member of the young generation who has lost faith not only in traditional religious values, but also in the meaning of his life in general. He sees an inevitable decline in the community around, and feels condemned to live an unhappy life.

To lose hope is a terrible thing. Having hope and faith in the future is a fundamental principle of Judaism. The prophet Jeremiah called God מְקוֹנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל, “Hope of Israel, its deliverer in time of trouble” (Jeremiah 14.8). Maimonides said that hope in the messianic era is one of the 13 basic principles of faith:

אֲנִי מְאֲמִין בְּאַמּוּנָה שְׁלִימָה בְּבִיאַת הַמָּשִׁיחַ; וְאֵל-עַל-פִּי שְׂיִתְמַמְהָמָה, אִם פֶּלֶז זֶה אֶחְקֶה לוֹ בְּכֹל יוֹם שְׂבִיבָא.

I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah; and even though the Messiah might be delayed, despite this I will wait every day, that the Messiah might come.

Theodor Herzl said, *Im Tirzu, ein zo agaddah* [*Altneuland* Old, New Land, 1902], “If you will it, it is no dream” - a powerful statement of our ability to hope for and work for a better future; and our Jewish national anthem, *Hatikvah*, is all about hope.

I know that sometimes bad things happen. I know that wishing this not so does not make the bad things go away. I know that trusting in God does not make everything right; and responses to tragedy along the lines of “It’s all for the best, God must have wanted this to happen, God doesn’t give you any more than you can handle” are usually insulting, painful, and theologically offensive.

However, not to have hope that the future can be better than the present is to believe that the entropy of the Universe inescapably will lead it to greater and greater states of chaos. It is to say that there is no Creator, that the Creator does not have a plan; or that the creator’s plan lacks ultimate meaning.

I have no empirical evidence that there is such a Creator and that there is such a meaningful plan. Like Pascal’s wager, however, I choose to find greater meaning in my life by betting that there is such meaning. If I am wrong and when I die I discover that there was no purpose to life, I will not have regretted the way I lived my life. If I bet against the Creator, and I am wrong, I will have lost the opportunity to live a meaningful life.

As we move from the year 5769 to 5770, although there are signs of an economic turnaround, we are still facing the uncertainty of economic crisis. It is still a frightening time. The wisdom of Psalm 27 can help us maintain perspective in the face of uncertainty, especially the last two lines, in which the Psalmist gives us a meditative focus on hope:

לִי לֵילָא הָאֶמְנָתִי לְרֵאוֹת בְּטוֹבָהּ - בְּאַרְצֵי חַיִּים - If only I would have the sensitivity and the faith to see God’s beauty in the world, תְּזַק וְיֵאֱמָר לְבָבִי וְקוֹה אֶל־ה' - then I would hope in Adonai, I would be strong and my heart would take courage, I would hope in Adonai.

Rabbi Richard Plavin wrote:

The man or woman who wrote this Psalm was clearly in difficult straits. He or she was at least as frightened about the future as we are. The Psalmist pleads with God, “Do not abandon me to the will of my foes, for false witnesses have risen against me, purveyors of malice and lies.” We seem to have those kind of people in our midst today. Certainly someone is to blame, but we are not sure who it is? Is it the people who entered into mortgages they could not afford? Was it the people on Wall Street who may have given us bad advice? We are confused and wonder, “In whom can I put my trust? Where do I find

refuge?" The Psalmist pleads: "One thing I have asked of Adonai, for this I yearn: to dwell in the House of Adonai all the days of my life, to behold God's goodness, to pray in God's sanctuary." The Psalmist is not telling us that we will find a solution by coming to shul. He is saying that he wants to feel God's presence, to know that God is in his life and with him in this difficult time. Rabbi Harold Kushner says it beautifully: "I am not asking God to change the world for me. I ask only one thing of God, nothing but this: Reassurance that God is there, that God is real, that God makes a difference." We all share that desire. We want to appreciate God's goodness so that we can begin to achieve a measure of tranquility. [The Orchard, Fall, 2009]

I think it can fairly be said that the search for a world of shalom and shalva, peace and tranquility, is a goal common to major religious traditions. We dream of a world in which there is no crime, no hatred based on race, sexual orientation, religion, or political preference; a world without war. Clearly, Judaism has not yet succeeded, and neither has Christianity or any other religion which seeks a peaceful world.

In order to achieve the world we dream of, we need to believe that it is possible. I am not a big fan of Chabad, but I do admire them for their single-mindedness with respect to the messianic era. They believe with absolute faith that the Messiah's appearance is imminent. They live each day expecting that tonight or tomorrow, the world will fundamentally change. They believe that it is within their power to help make this happen, that each little mitzvah that a Jew does might be the tipping point that will make it all happen.

This kind of optimism is charged with excitement and power. I believe that without this kind of optimism, religion cannot succeed. We cannot change the world if we do not believe that it can be changed, and if we do not believe that we have within ourselves the power to make a difference.

Now, back to the poem with which we began. The first impression was wrong. Things are not as they appear, which is a good life lesson. The last line is the key to unlocking the hidden meaning, "And all of this will come true unless we choose to reverse it." We can choose to reverse the pessimism, we can choose to reject the negative and embrace the positive. This is the basic message of Yom Kippur - that we have the power and the responsibility to choose how we want to lead our lives. We can choose to do teshuvah, to turn our attitude around 180 degrees. Follow each line of the poem with me as I read it in reverse, from the bottom up:

There is hope.

It is foolish to presume that
my generation is apathetic and lethargic.

It will be evident that
my peers and I care about this Earth.

No longer can it be said that
environmental destruction will be the norm.

In the future,
I will live in a country of my own making.

I do not concede that
30 years from now I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce.

Experts tell me

this is a quick fix society,
 but this will not be true in my era.
 Families stayed together
 once upon a time.
 I tell you this,
 family
 is more important than
 work.
 I have my priorities straight because
 my employer will know that
 they are not the most important thing in my life.
 So in 30 years I will tell my children,
 "Money will make me happy"
 is a lie. And
 happiness comes from within.
 I realize this may be a shock, but
 I can change the world
 and I refuse to believe that
 I am part of a lost generation.

This is a religious message worthy of Yom Kippur. Life has meaning, and it is our responsibility to live it in a meaningful way. Holding on to an awareness of our power to make a difference is not always easy. No matter what happens to us, we can still strive for the things that really matter in life. No matter how crazy and uncertain the world is, we know that God will be there for us and that in God's presence we can find peace.

Deuteronomy 30:12 says,

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקַּחֵהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָהּ:

It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?"

Some commentators suggest that the verse is speaking about teshuvah, repentance. The message is that we can all transform ourselves. Change is within our grasp. Neither we nor the world is frozen in the current state. If we begin with ourselves today, it is within our power to create a different world tomorrow.

May we find the strength and the courage to believe that change and hope is possible; may we find the strength and the courage to live with hope and optimism, and arrange our priorities accordingly; and may we be blessed with happiness and tranquility in the coming year.