

Erev Rosh Hashanah, I opened my remarks about the holiday by pointing to a phrase in the liturgy that we subsequently repeated five more times, “simha l’artzekha v’sason l’irekha,” “happiness for your land and joy for your city.” Given the state of the world and in particular, Israel and Jerusalem, one’s initial reaction might be to receive this statement as a pie-in-the-sky, wildly optimistic, idea.

But that phrase caught my attention because what I needed and still need, facing a new year, were reasons to be hopeful and happy. I don’t think I’m alone in this desire. There are many reasons to be unhappy and angry and to despair, but I don’t want to live that way. More to the point, Judaism does not want us to live that way. Judaism wants us to be hopeful and happy. I believe that living with hope is logical and realistic. Some might call living without hope “facing reality,” but I am convinced that living a hopeful life is better than living without hope, that even if you believe that hope is a delusion, living with hope has tangible benefits, which I’ll get to in a bit, and thus is a better way to live.

Now that I’ve spoiled the ending of this sermon and you know exactly what I want you to get out of it, let’s go back to the beginning and start by making a distinction between hope and optimism.

Optimism is typically defined as “A disposition or tendency to look on the more favorable side of events or conditions and to expect the most favorable outcome.”

By contrast, hope means to work for and to wait for something with the confident expectation and anticipation that it will, at some point sooner or later, be fulfilled. So optimism is somewhat passive while hope requires some measure of work.

And there is science behind this distinction: A 2004 paper in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* determined that “hope focuses more directly on the personal attainment of specific goals, whereas optimism focuses more broadly on the expected quality of future outcomes in general.” In other words, optimism is the belief that things will turn out all right; hope makes no such assumption but is a conviction that one can act to make things better in some way.

Hope and optimism can go together, but they don’t have to. You can be a hopeless optimist who feels personally helpless but assumes that everything will turn out all right. You can be a hopeful pessimist who makes negative predictions about the future but has confidence that you can improve things in your life and others’.

Vaclav Havel, the playwright and dissident who rose to eventually become President of the Czech Republic, captured a sense of hope when he wrote:

I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist, because I am not sure that everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart. Hope is the feeling that life and work have a meaning. You either have it or you don't, regardless of the state of the world that surrounds you.

Life without hope is an empty, boring, and useless life. I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big as life itself.”¹

Judaism is built on the notion of hope. Our system of mitzvot gives us things to work on. It keeps us moving forward, even when the goal at the end, some kind of beautiful messianic future, seems so far away. Hope is Jewish because it requires effort. You can’t hope in your head; that’s just optimism. Hope is the quality of believing that I can make things better if I put some

1. Thank you to Rabbi Harold Kravitz for this quotation.

effort into it. It is fundamentally Jewish to believe in a messiah, a messianic era, and a redemption of humanity, paired with a belief that human beings are a partner in God's creation. We are co-responsible with God for maintaining the world. Hope is a first cousin to the idea that each and any and every mitzvah we do furthers our aim of *tikkun*, of solidifying God's presence in the world.

The talmudic Sage R. Abbahu imagines that God created and destroyed multiple worlds before creating the one we now inhabit (Bereishit Rabbah 3:7). Commenting on this midrash, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik observed that we have God not only creating and re-creating, but also rebuilding after destroying. "As God creates and recreates... so too, should [human beings] be ready to rebuild and reconstruct, even as previous structures collapse." The Midrash embodies the hope that even when things are at their worst, some element of them can be reclaimed and used to build something better.

Joshua 2:18 rewards Rahab the prostitute for protecting the Israelite scouts when they reconnoiter Jericho and instructs her to hang a length of crimson cord, תְּקֵנֶת חוּט הַשָּׁנִי, out her window to protect her as the Israelites invade and conquer Jericho. A *tikvah* is a cord of hope on which her life depends.

Isaiah [11:1] speaks about a shoot growing from the stump of Jesse, and that twig will bring wisdom, insight, counsel, and valor to the world. He speaks about a tree stump that appears all but dead, but produces a King David, bringing devotion and reverence for God into the world.²

The Psalmist, in a Psalm we recite in the days leading up to and following Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur [27], asserts:

קִוְיָ אֱלֹהֵי' תִּזְק וַיֵּאֱמַן לִבִּי וְקִוְיָ אֱלֹהֵי'.

Have hope in Adonai, be strong, place hope in Adonai.

In the world of the Talmud, some questions are not answered. The unresolved discussions are concluded with the word *Teku*, meaning "it stands unresolved." Jewish folklore gives it a secondary, perhaps more significant, meaning. *Teku* is interpreted as standing for the first letters of the phrase: *Tishbi Y'taretz Kushyot U'ba'ayot* "[Elijah the] Tishbi will resolve all questions and problems."

Elijah the prophet plays a fascinating role in Jewish folk tales. Elijah is pictured in the Book of Kings as a man who never died. He is transported to heaven in a fiery chariot, where he dwells until he is needed to intervene and to save Jews who are in trouble. Elijah will also come at the end of time, to announce the arrival of the Messiah. And he is also assigned the additional task of solving all difficult problems that had been left unresolved. In the meantime, *teku*, the questions are left hanging in abeyance.

My rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Kassel Abelson (z"l) suggested that the principle of *teku* has broader implications, applying to the many areas of life where we must learn to live with unsolved problems, with question marks hovering over the future. Life comes hand in hand with questions and problems. What do we do when we find ourselves drained of hope by an uncertain future? We turn to the principle of *teku*. Some problems have no solution and worrying about them has no benefit. Some problem are so big they cannot be tackled by a single human. And some problems are beyond our capacity to completely solve; we only have the capacity to do what we can and hold onto a reasonable hope that others will pick up where we left off. *Teku!*

2. Thank you to Rabbi Shai Held for the references from Bereshit Rabba, Rabbi Soloveitchik, Joshua, and Isaiah.

Judaism provides us with the principle of *teku* to teach us that we must learn how to live with unanswered questions and to live as best we can in difficult circumstances. *Teku* is to hope and trust in God, do all you can, and rely on God to see to it that the efforts are not wasted. It enables us to accept trouble when necessary and surmount it when possible.

Studies show that accepting the principle of *teku* and living with hope:

- makes it more likely that we will achieve our goals,
- decreases depression and anxiety, and
- increases wellness and coping skills during loss.

Hopeful people tend to be happier, healthier, vote more regularly, and tend to be engaged outside of themselves.³

On Rosh Hashanah, we responded to the sound of the shofar by saying, *Hayom Harat Olam* -- Today is the birthday of the world, or more evocatively, today is pregnant with eternities of possibility. We cultivate hope when we reach out to things beyond ourselves, things which are in a sense eternal, when we can see a world that is greater than our lifespan. Nature is an eternal process, a generation of children will see a future beyond our reach, a community grows and evolves, life cycle events affirm that humanity survives the death of an individual, that we keep producing and nurturing new generations. The simple act of learning is a positive affirmation that my life has meaning, my personal growth is important, and as I age, I can share my wisdom with others. Immersing ourselves in our Jewish traditions reminds us that we are an eternal people, and our wisdom sustains the world. We find hope by engaging in healthy lives of engaging in mitzvot to benefit others and to connect ourselves to something larger than ourselves, larger than our community, our country, and our world.

We hold onto hope because our Jewish tradition gives us the ability to live with questions and respond with *teku*, and say *Hashlaikh al haShem Y'havkha*, "Place our burdens on God, knowing that God will sustain us!" [Psalm 55:23] Amen!

3. My gratitude to Rabbis Debra Newman Kamin and Debra Orenstein for informing this section.