

KOL NIDREI SERMON 5774: JUDAISM AND HOPE

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Rabbi Hugo Gryn, who was in Auschwitz as a child along with his father, recalls in his memoir: *The Jewish prisoners in our barracks...decided that we would celebrate [Chanukah] by lighting a menorah every night. Bits of wood and metal were collected and shaped into light-holders and everyone agreed to save the week's meager ration of margarine that would be used for fuel. It was my job to take apart an abandoned prison cap and fashion wicks from its threads. [On] the first night of Chanukah...most of [us] gathered around the menorah...Two portions of margarine were melted down—my wicks in place. We chanted the blessing, praising God who “performed miracles for our ancestors in those days and at this time,” and as...I tried to light the wick, there was only a bit of spluttering and no flame...What the “scientists” in our midst failed to point out was that margarine does not burn! As we dispersed and made our way to the bunk beds, I turned not so much to my father, but on him, upset at the fiasco and bemoaning this waste of precious calories. Patiently, he taught me one of the most lasting lessons of my life and I believe that he made my survival possible. “Don’t be so angry,” he said to me. “You know that this festival celebrates the victory of the spirit over tyranny and might. You and I have had to go once for over a week without proper food and another time almost three days without water, but you cannot live for three minutes without hope!”¹*

Without hope, we perish, if not physically, then emotionally. We must believe that a better future is ahead despite our present situation – despite a world economy barely back from the brink, despite a Middle East where the prospects of peace seem dimmer than ever, despite an American government that is all but dysfunctional. But hope and optimism are not the same. Rabbi Michael Marmor of Hebrew Union College explains difference between hope and optimism is one of action versus inaction. “To be optimistic,” he says, “means to believe that everything is heading towards a happy ending. To have hope means to believe that whatever happens, a way of coping and building towards the future may be found.”²

The optimist sits back and waits for things to get better. The person who has hope tries to figure out what he or she can do to make his life better and to bring about a better future. Optimism is encapsulated in the story of the man and the flood. As the flood waters rise, a man is sitting on the stoop of his house. Another man comes by in a row boat. “Come on in,” he tells the man on the stoop. The man on the stoop refuses. “I have faith in God,” he says, “I’ll wait for God to save me.” The flood waters continue to rise, so the man scrambles to the second floor of his house. A man in a motor boat comes by. “Come on in,” he tells the man in the house. Again, the man refuses, saying: “I’m waiting for God to save me.” The flood waters keep rising. Pretty soon the water reaches just under the man's roof, so he scrambles onto the roof. Just then, a helicopter comes by and lowers a rope. The pilot shouts down to the man on the roof.

¹ *Chasing Shadows: Memories of a Vanished World, 2000* in “Lifeline to the Future,” Michael Marmor, *Reform Judaism Magazine*, 2009.

² Marmor in *Reform Judaism*.

“Climb up the rope,” he tells him. The man refuses again: “I’m waiting for God to rescue me.” The flood waters keep rising and the man in the house drowns. When he gets to heaven, he asks God why God didn’t save him. God replies: “I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?”

The moral of the story? Being an optimist means waiting for someone else to save us. Having hope means that, for things to get better, we have to participate and to act. For Sir Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, hope is one of Judaism’s great contributions. “One of the most formative moments in the history of Judaism came in the encounter between Moses and God at the burning bush,” he says. When Moses asks God what God’s name is, God responds by saying: “Ehyeh asher Ehyeh” which means “I will be what I will be.” According to Rabbi Sachs, what God is saying to Moses is that there is a future, one that is unknown – one that God and human beings can create together. “At the heart of Judaism is a belief...in human freedom,” he says. “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.”

Indeed, think about our central narrative, the story of the Exodus. We were slaves for 400 years, but we were able to rewrite the ending to this story and leave Egypt. The Exodus tells us that we can change the circumstances of our lives. This is very different from the way the surrounding cultures at the time of the Bible viewed life. For the Canaanites, even for the Greeks, fate was predetermined, with no escape, the result of the machinations of the gods. Judaism declared that we are created b’tzelem Elohim, in God’s image, with the freedom to choose between right and wrong, between life and death.

Indeed, in our Torah reading tomorrow afternoon, God says, “I set before you life and death. Choose life.” In other words, choose to be engaged and vital. Don’t just sit back and be a passive witness to what happens to you. Or consider that God tells Moses at the burning bush that God’s name is “Eheyeh-asher-Ehyeh,” which means “I will be what I will be.” According to Rabbi Sachs, what God is saying to Moses is that there is a future, one that is unknown. Because God created the world through the word, and because we were created in God’s image, we also have the capacity to speak, so we too can create our world. As Sachs explains: “Human beings are the only life form capable of using the future tense. Only beings who can imagine the world other than it is, are capable of freedom. And if we are free, the future is open, dependent us. We can know the beginning of our story but not the end...Judaism, the religion of freedom, is faith in the future tense.”

This past year, I taught a series of classes on the biblical prophets. In some ways, this was a very difficult class. The prophets present us with images of utter destruction and doom to warn us of the consequences of our immoral behavior. Yet the prophets offer us hope and redemption as well, hope, not out of victory and success, but hope out of defeat and despair. Their speeches are set in the midst of the destruction of the Temple and the exile of our people. In 587 BCE, for example, while Jerusalem is being besieged, Jeremiah is thrown in prison for foretelling the fall

of the city. Yet the prophet buys a piece of land to signal that better days are ahead, and that the Israelites will once again return to the land of their fathers.³

Or think about the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones come back to life, a metaphor for the redemption of Israel and its people. And there is Isaiah's grand vision of the end of time, When the Israelites shall be gathered back from exile, when even strangers shall join to recognize the one God, and when "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples," words engraved on the very walls of this sanctuary.

Which brings me to the Unetaneh Tokef, that awful prayer asking "Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die?" Here is Leonard Cohen's somewhat modernized version of the prayer:



And who by fire, who by water,
who in the sunshine, who in the night time,
who by high ordeal, who by common trial,
who in your merry merry month of may,
who by very slow decay,
and who shall I say is calling?
And who in her lonely slip, who by barbiturate,
who in these realms of love, who by something blunt,
and who by avalanche, who by powder,
who for his greed, who for his hunger,
and who shall I say is calling?

And who by brave assent, who by accident,
who in solitude, who in this mirror,
who by his lady's command, who by his own hand,
who in mortal chains, who in power,
and who shall I say is calling?

In a year when random acts of violence --the Newtown and Boston marathon shootings, the devastating Hurricane Sandy in New York, the destructive tornado in Moore, OK -- when all these events have left us feeling more unsettled and vulnerable than ever -- the words of this prayer are chilling. Who shall live and who shall die, Who shall perish by water and who by fire...we may very well wonder where there is room for hope. The traditional prayer actually provides us with the answer: *U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah, maavirin et roah ha-gezerah* -- "But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe decree." In other words, our attitude, our intention, our actions, help to soften the severity of what life hands us, to assure us that there is a way out of the darkness. Through repentance, prayer and righteousness, we are better able to face the realities with which life presents us and we are able to help others do so as well. Because, as Rabbi Marmur explains, hope is not only about an imagined future, but also about the consolation friends and family can provide in the present. Hope in Hebrew is

³ 32.

tikvah, a word that is connected to mikvah—the ritual bath. “Hope, then, is not only a cord that reaches back to us from a future still unrealized,” he says. “[I]t is also a comforting pool providing solace, purification, and regeneration. Think of the times when we face adversity – grave illness, economic setbacks, personal uncertainty. Holding onto a rope is not enough. We also need to be immersed in love, support, and friendship. Just as hope can inspire and enlighten, it can also warm and soothe. Our families and friends, colleagues and neighbors can constitute a huge reservoir of hope.”⁴

New Yorkers and others transformed the raging waters of Hurricane Sandy into just such a mikveh. Here is a report from an eyewitness: “...in the Rockaways, Coney Island and Red Hook, homes were lost, property damaged, and businesses devastated. Public housing in Red Hook and Gowanus have been without electricity, heat, water and elevator service since the storm. Thankfully, people in ways large and small have spontaneously come together to help others. Groups like Red Hook Initiative, which was primarily a youth center, have stepped in to coordinate volunteer efforts locally. In Park Slope, two shelters were set up by the city at the Park Slope Armory and the John Jay High School Complex. Congregation Beth Elohim and other groups have been busy cooking and providing clothing and care for the evacuees from the Rockaways that arrived by the busload...[A] local woman...was inviting friends and neighbors to cook a hot dish that she would drive over to Red Hook the next morning, providing a hot lunch for those in the Red Hook Houses. The Old Stone House in Park Slope, a museum and cultural center, is now a drop-off site for donations. Yesterday the House was filled to the gills with volunteers sorting through the dry goods, food, water and clothing that was contributed...

Pastor Ann Kanfield of Greenpoint Reformed Church wrote, ‘I am amazed by the outpouring of goodwill and a real desire to help among New Yorkers, but also from the world at large. We’ve received monetary donations from friends across the country. One woman sent \$20 when she only had \$40 in her bank account. She felt grateful for what she had and she wanted to help those who needed it more than she did.’ ...The number of volunteers who came out and continue to help with the recovery is overwhelming. To me, it’s one of the most inspiring things I’ve ever seen in my life. I hope this spirit of generosity lasts for a very long time...it’s inspiring that people are feeling such a pull towards others, such a sense of concern, a real desire to help. It’s really quite beautiful.”⁵

By providing others with help and support, these good people went a long way towards insuring that those who were struck by misfortune were taken care of and given a chance at a brighter tomorrow. This is how hope works. And this is our mandate as Jews. In Rabbi Sachs’ words: “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. There is no more challenging vocation. Throughout history, when

⁴ Marmur, *Reform Judaism*

⁵ Louise Crawford, <http://www.katiecouric.com/features/new-york-city-is-a-city-of-helpers/>

human beings have sought hope they have found it in the Jewish story. Judaism is the religion, and Israel the home, of hope.” Or, as Rabbi David Hartman taught: “...to live as a Jew requires the courage to dream and aspire for a better tomorrow...The miracle of Hanukkah and the characteristic of the Jewish people is that we have the courage to dream, yearn, and begin without certainty as to the future.”⁶ If the inmates in Bloc 4 at Auschwitz could gather to light Chanukah candles, believing that miracles are possible, whether or not the wicks could burn in margarine, then we all have that capacity for hope.

⁶ As paraphrased by Donniel Hartman, “Judaism in Light of the Rebirth of the State of Israel: The Philosophy of David Hartman,” in *Judaism and Modernity: The Religious Philosophy of David Hartman*, p.22.