

A RECIPE FOR HOPE

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Rabbi Esther Adler, Mount Zion Temple, Saint Paul, MN

Two Jewish friends who haven't seen each other in a while are catching up.

"So, Nu? How are you?"

"How should I be? And you?"

"Would it do any good to complain?"

Why do Jews always answer a question with another question?

How should we answer?

It is a classic Jewish practice to answer a question with another question. So, a few weeks ago when Erica asked me what I planned on speaking about tonight, I answered, "What do you need to hear about?" And she answered - not with another question - but quickly and definitively, "Hope."

And I realized that hope is what I needed to speak about.

We are living, it seems, in dark times. Whether we are concerned over America or Israel, the third world or the planet, economics or immigrants, shootings or forest fires, it can be hard to feel hopeful. And there are many among us struggling in their personal lives: dealing with illness, loss, financial or family troubles. Dark times indeed.

So, Erica, this is a sermon for you, and for me, and for, I suspect, most of you sitting here tonight. This is a sermon about hope.

The first thing that comes to mind when I think of hope is Emily Dickinson: "Hope is the thing with feathers..." But I don't find that particularly helpful definition. So, what is it we are talking about when we talk about hope? Although it may sound like a truism, I think hope is what keeps us from despair, which I find easier to define.

If despair is giving up on the future, then hope enables us to have some faith in it, and to keep moving forward even when it seems impossible. Hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism is confidence in a positive outcome. Hope is what keeps us going when things don't turn out the way we would wish. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain writes: "Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope. Knowing what we do of our past, no Jew can be an optimist. But Jews have never – despite a history of sometimes awesome suffering – given up hope."¹

¹Sacks, Jonathan "The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid a Clash of Civilizations," Continuum, 2003, page 206

It takes courage to have hope. And effort. Which leads to the obvious question, how do we muster the fortitude to hope in dark times?

Among all my exploration about hope over the past few weeks, a conversation with my daughter Sarah stands out. We were driving through the endless flatlands of Iowa and Nebraska on our way to Colorado, so we had lots of time to talk. She told about the week she had just spent as a counselor at Camp Kesem.

Camp Kesem is a national organization through which college students provide a free week of sleep away camp for kids who have or had a parent with cancer.² Sarah describes her experience as a counselor there as life-changing in many ways, but she told me that the campers report above all that Kesem gives them hope.

Kesem is Hebrew for “magic.” And while Camp Kesem may seem to do magic, it really utilizes well thought out strategies to bring hope into lives that often have little. As Sarah and I drove through many hours of corn fields and cow pastures we explored what exactly about camp Kesem gives these kids hope, and what we can learn from them to bring hope into our own lives?

The first few days at Kesem are all about fun, allowing the kids to take a break from the burdens of life in a home dealing with cancer or its aftermath, to know that it is OK to enjoy life even if your parent has cancer.

Like the kids at camp Kesem, we can begin to cultivate hope by taking a break from our burdens- whatever they be - and allowing ourselves to experience joy. Vacations can provide that, but not all of us have the resources or time to go on vacation. So, where, in our daily lives, can we find glimmers of joy to pierce the darkness?

Harvard professor Tal Ben-Shahar studies happiness. He points out that we can't expect ourselves to stay positive under pressure unless we have trained our brains in advance and suggests daily rituals to “practice positivity” so it becomes our default mode of thinking. As with anything in life, practice makes progress. The best way to cultivate hope, Ben-Shahar offers, is to spend a few minutes every day focusing on gratitude, by keeping a daily gratitude journal.

Every night write down 5 or better yet 10 things you are grateful for. Or in the morning, 5 things you look forward to that day. Studies have shown that meditating on gratitude daily can actually reinforce neural pathways and increase the levels of dopamine in our brain that help us to feel more hopeful in both good times and bad.³ We can begin to cultivate hope by recognizing the good in our lives, even if it is merely finding the silver

² See <http://campkesem.org/>

³ Ben-Shahar, Tal. *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*. McGraw-Hill, 2007. For more on gratitude and the brain, see also Emmons, Robert A. *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

lining of an otherwise dark cloud. In Mussar practice⁴, this is known as “*Hakarat HaTov*,” and is actually modeled by God in the first chapter of Genesis: At the end of each day the narrative tells us: “*VaYar elohim ki tov* - And God saw that it was good.”⁵

There are many ways to cultivate gratitude. Journaling is one way. Another is offered by our morning liturgy, the practice of saying “*Modeh Ani*” when we awake, giving thanks for the simple act of waking up alive to the new day: *Modeh Ani Lafenecha, Melech Chai v'kayam...* “I give thanks before you, sovereign, living God, for returning my soul to me [this morning.]”⁶

Another is to make a point of actively looking for those proverbial silver linings: We can choose how we look at things. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav teaches us that if we each seek out that one spark of goodness, of light, in every person, in every situation, eventually, the darkness will fade.

Every human being is made in the Divine Image, and we can seek that out. And consider this: despite all our national and global troubles, today people are living longer, healthier, lives than ever before in history. Other encouraging facts are just a click or two away on Google.⁷ Also, there is a lovely collection of Jewish songs of hope as a free download on the internet.⁸

Back now, to Kesem. The second thing about the first few days at Camp Kesem is that the kids find a community of people who understand them, who can truly empathize because they have been through it too. As Jews we understand how essential community has always been to our survival. Tradition teaches that we all, every single one of us, stood together at Mount Sinai to enter the covenant with God. It is not by accident that almost all of our prayers are in the plural, and that our most deeply felt prayers - Like the mourner's Kaddish - require a Minyan: a community of 10 other Jews. One of our wisest sages, Hillel, taught “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*. Never separate yourself from community.”⁹ It is very hard to find hope in isolation. And so, as we gather here on these Holy Days, we can kindle hope in one another with every hello or handshake or hug, and I encourage you to make it a point to do so.

At Kesem, on the third day of camp, they have Color Wars. The whole camp is divided into four teams: Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow, and they compete in a variety of games and challenges, including cheering each other on. By mixing the kids up from their age groups, and giving them goals to achieve together, Kesem gives them the opportunity to

⁴ Mussar is the Jewish spiritual practice of cultivating positive character traits. To learn more see: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mussar-movement/> For current Mussar opportunities at Mount Zion, go to <https://mzion.org/?s=Mussar>

⁵ Listen to a touching musical version here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zno_aX5mNM

⁶ A recording of Modeh Ani which will make you smile: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=271YZsbm4IU>

⁷ Try this one: <https://www.sunnyskyz.com/blog/172/40-Facts-That-Will-Make-You-Incredibly-Happy-24-Is-A-Guarantee>

⁸ <https://rabbidavid.bandcamp.com/releases>

⁹ Pirkei Avot 2:5

meet new friends who are older or younger than themselves and therefore offer different perspectives, but more importantly, experience the power and support of teamwork.

This would be an extension of community, or perhaps more accurately an *intention* of community. While it is great to be seated here in this sanctuary with several hundred landsmen sharing songs and prayers, it is important also to have a closer-knit team who seek the same goals and can be a true support system. When we can depend on teammates, and know others depend on us, then we can depend on the future. And that is hope. We can find teammates in new friends or old, on committees, volunteer organizations, book club, or support group. Here at Mount Zion you can check out our new Small Groups initiative.¹⁰

At Kesem, on Wednesday afternoon -the midpoint of the Kesem experience, - the campers prepare for their Empowerment Ceremony which takes place after dinner. The prep is often an arts and crafts project that gives the kids an opportunity to reflect on the impact their parent's cancer has had on their lives. At the Empowerment ceremony, first return campers tell their stories, and then new campers are invited to speak. By this time, they have already built relationships with each other through the activities of the first few days, and they know they are safe sharing their pain in a community of people who understand. They support each other in the knowledge that sometimes that "it is OK not to be OK"

During the empowerment ceremony, tears will be shed, and when that happens, others reach out and offer comfort and support. This is also where, Sarah said, they express that Kesem gives them hope. Hope doesn't come from simply escaping the pain, but also from recognizing, naming, and sharing it, being vulnerable and giving and receiving support.

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat points out that authentic spiritual life calls us to experience all of what is. Including the hard things: pain, sorrow, loss, rejection, grief. Simply avoiding them or hiding them under a pretense of joy is denial, and as Oscar Wilde has said, "To deny one's own experiences is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the soul."¹¹

Judaism call us to be spiritually honest. That's what these holy days are all about: taking an honest appraisal of our lives so that we can do the work of Teshuva: returning to our best selves. We are empowered when we can name the pain, receive support, and look ahead. Having hope does not mean denying our current circumstance but rather not letting it paralyze us. Sociologist Peter Berger calls hope "a signal of transcendence,"¹² something that speaks to us from beyond where we are.

¹⁰ <https://mzion.org/connect/mz-connect/>

¹¹ De Profundis <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/921/921-h/921-h.htm>

¹² Berger, Peter. A Rumor of Angels: Modern and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural. Doubleday, 1969. 4

The kids at Kesem say that Cancer stinks, but it was cancer that brought them to Kesem, that made them the people they are; One camper said, "I wish my dad didn't have cancer but I don't actually think I would be a happier person because I wouldn't be me and I like who the cancer made me." In other words, even though cancer is horrible, and nobody would ask for it, hope comes from the ability to see what good can or has come from it in the end. However dark our present may be, facing it with hope empowers us to take steps forward towards healing.

Back at camp, after the Empowerment Ceremony comes Happy Hour, where, the kids choose from among a variety of fun activities like Laser Tag, music, and games. Putting makeup and nail polish on the male counselors seems to be a favorite. Letting loose after facing their pain reminds the kids that after pain they can yet, again, feel joy.

On Thursday at Kesem, is Messy Games. This is the favorite day at Kesem. In Messy Games, the entire camp engages in total chaos creating every imaginable kind of mess with paint, mud, goo, and gunk. The kids love it. In the evening, after showers and dinner they have a dance party. So, does that mean to be hopeful we should have a mud fight and then dance? Of course not, but Messy Day at camp has more to it than meets the eye. It gives the kids an opportunity to embrace chaos, and even create it themselves. In their lives at home, the chaos is brought on by cancer, and the kids have no control over it, but at camp, they can experience chaos being temporary, and feel what it is like for order to yet prevail.

We often experience chaos in our lives that is not of our own making. But if we can take a lesson from Messy Games, it is that the chaos is always temporary, and there is always SOMETHING we can DO. There is some action we can take, even within the chaos. We can find some aspect of life in which we do have some control, we can take small steps to ameliorate the chaos we can't control.

There is great wisdom in the Serenity Prayer which most of us associate with AA, but was written by theologian and outspoken Holocaust critic Reinhold Niebuhr: "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."¹³ But we take this prayer one step further to taking action, which in his life Niebuhr did - he opposed Nazism, promoted democracy, and supported the state of Israel. At camp, the kids take action by having fun, which, essentially, is a kid's job. For us as adults, our job is to take actions that can actually make a difference, however small.

At Kesem, the young adult counselors, college students, most of whom haven't experienced cancer in their families, are modeling this by giving their time and energy throughout the year to raise funds and plan, and then spend their time in the summer as counselors.

¹³ http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/prose/niebuhr/serenity_prayer

For us - in the national sphere - it means calling a legislator, casting a vote, or helping someone else get to the polls. For Israel, you can participate in our coming Year of programming: called Israel: Israel: Wrestling With Our Relationship. Or contribute to the URJ's "Campaign for Religious Equality in Israel."¹⁴ You will hear more about that tomorrow.

In our personal spheres, it might mean reaching out to help someone else by making a meal, offering a ride, sending a card, making a phone call. Doing something helpful is doing something hopeful. Psalm 37 says: "בְּטֹחַ בַּיהוָה, וַעֲשֵׂה-טוֹב, Trust in God and do good." The Talmud teaches that we should always hope for a miracle, but never wait for one, or as our Shabbat Prayer book puts it: "Pray as if everything depended on God; act as if everything depends on you."¹⁵ Prayer, too, has its place in hope, but is only effective if accompanied by action.

Hope, in Hebrew, is Tikvah, which comes from the root *KAV*. *Kav* conceptually refers to a line, and by extension, a path, or direction. Hope is a lifeline, but it does require direction. As I explored Kesem and hope with Sarah, I discerned what seemed to me to be a rather simple, though not necessarily easy, plan for cultivating hope.

First, find joy.
Next, find teammates.
Then, with the support of your team,
acknowledge your pain.
Finally, take action.
Then begin again.

As I thought more about it, it occurred to me that our High Holy Days follow this very pattern. We begin with Rosh Hashanah, celebrating the Birthday of the World, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to welcome a new year. We do this in community, coming together in the synagogue with the Jewish people across time and space, people who have the shared experience of being Jews in a non-Jewish world, and with the non-Jewish loved ones who support us.

Then, after 10 days of Teshuvah - honest and difficult spiritual work - on Yom Kippur, we come together again to acknowledge our brokenness, our need, our pain, and to commit ourselves to making the coming year better than the one just ended. And, after the final *Tekiah Gedolah*, our tradition tells us to go outside and begin to build our Sukkah, for Sukkot comes just 5 days later. Sukkot, which requires us to build, to share hospitality, and to return to joy, even as we acknowledge the fragility of that joy and of life itself.¹⁶

¹⁴ www.mzion.org Click on DONATE on the black bar at the top of the home page, then on Yom Kippur Appeal. Scroll down. For more information see: file:///C:/Users/eadler/Downloads/CFRE%20Talking%20Points%20(1).pdf

¹⁵ Mishkan T'filah, A Reform Siddur, CCAR Press page 47. This quote has been attributed to the fourth century Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo.

¹⁶For more about Sukkot, see <https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/sukkot>

So now, I invite you to take a moment, relax your body and take a few deep breaths. In what area of your life do you need to cultivate hope? Look to your left and your right, ahead and behind you, at your Mount Zion community, the people who have gathered tonight to walk with you into this new year, then close your eyes.

Take a slow, deep breath, and call to mind something that brings you joy.

With your next deep breath, offer a silent prayer of gratitude for that joy, a prayer of gratitude that will feed your hope.

Breathe again, deeply, in and out, and imagine yourself surrounded by your team: those people who you know will support you, hold you up and cheer you on.

And, finally, with your next deep breath, think about an act of Teshuva, something you can DO, great or small, in the coming days or the coming year, to help return you to your best self.

That in turn, will help our world return to its best self, and God can look at our world and say, "*Hiney tov me'od* - this is very good." Which can give us all hope.

Anthem: There is Hope: <https://rabbidavid.bandcamp.com/track/there-is-hope>