

Finding Hope Here All Along

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Behind me, rising toward the heavens is one of the most unusual Eternal Light sculptures in the world. It is a narrow lifeline hovering above a live flame.

I have always loved gazing upon it, the six globes above representing the days of the week, the final one at the bottom representing Shabbat and our world radiating light in all directions.

That open flame, forming the Hebrew letter Shin, has been lit throughout this pandemic even in an empty sanctuary.

It was faithfully burning while we were not here -- and many of us are still not here.

Think of where you have been these past eighteen months while here in this sanctuary, this flame was burning bright.

That light has been a constant going back to 1954 when this sanctuary was dedicated and before that other Eternal Lights were lit in our previous three buildings going back to 1856 and before that other Eternal Lights throughout the millennia and across the lands.

Between us, this Eternal Light has in fact gone out twice in the past 67 years that I'm aware of – once during the renovation in 2000 when we transferred the light to a temporary kerosine lamp that is still in our display case in Margolis Hall, and once in 2003 because a 5th grader on a shabbaton figured out how to turn off the gas and then felt horrible. I assured that 5th grader that the verse in Exodus actually says that the light should be continually lit, not continually on, and all was well.

Yet with those two exceptions, this light has been continually on and that thread of a line stretching toward the heavens has been a source of hope. In Hebrew, hope and thread are related. *Kav*, thread, is part of the word *tikvah*, hope. As long as there is a thread of possibility, there is reason to hope, reason to work toward a vision of making everything ok in our life and in the world. As Maimonides taught, it is holding onto the plausibility of the possible, not just the necessity of the probable that gives us hope.¹ It is possible that we will find a way to navigate a way out of this pandemic for everyone soon. It is possible that scientists, politicians, innovators, and activists will make a significant enough dent in our climate crisis.

¹ Professor Marshall Ganz from Harvard quotes Maimonides, “To be a realist is to know that in the world, there is also possibility, not just probability. It is always probable that Goliath will win, but sometimes David does. Hope is belief in the plausibility of the possible instead of the necessity of the probable.”

It is possible that unexpected things will happen that will make life better. It has happened before and can happen again. There is a thread of possibility, and it is sustained by an Eternal Light.

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, who was rabbi at Mount Zion when this Eternal Light was installed, has a note in the Book of Exodus in his Torah: A Modern Commentary where the Eternal Light, in Hebrew, the *Ner Tamid*, is described: “Every Jew must light the *Ner Tamid* in [their] own heart, not only in ... a synagogue.”²

That is what counts. How can this light give us fortitude for the challenges we face in whatever we do outside of Mount Zion?

Think about the impossible choices that parents have had to make in recent weeks trying to find their thread of hope. A mother in California this week is trying to decide whether to ask her son’s teacher to keep the windows open to protect him from Covid or keep them closed to protect him from inhaling smoke from the wildfires.³

A few weeks ago, a father in Kabul hoisted a few-month-old baby over razor wires to a US soldier in the chaotic days of the Taliban taking over the city. What kind of desperation would lead to such an act?

We tell stories of Jewish parents decades ago, in the late 1930s, who put their children on trains in Berlin and Vienna and Prague, the Kindertransport to England, not knowing whether they would ever see their kids again. Most did not.

It is unimaginable having to make such choices. There are times in life when that Eternal Light seems hidden. In those times, we can fall into despair and give up.

We Jews have learned how not to give into despair even with our deeply felt anxiety. The world is a very narrow bridge, like a thread, and its purpose is to move us forward across the chasm below. We are, as Rabbi Adler taught, *Ivrim* “Transitioners,” crossing over dangerous bridges throughout our history. Resilience is part of our spiritual DNA. We have dealt with the most awful of crises, impossible choices, and harrowing trauma.

And it has been in periods of trauma where our creative insights have been born, our central texts codified. Our ideas did not come in times of tranquility and continuity. They came when there were significant breaks from the past. The Torah itself was written down in exile in Babylonia after the destruction of the 1st Temple. The Talmud after the destruction of the 2nd Temple.

² Gleanings on Parashat Tetzaveh, Exodus 27:21, pp. 624-5 in The Torah: A Modern Commentary, ed. by W. Gunther Plaut, 1981 edition (the previous edition to the one in our Mount Zion pews.).

³ <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1036387269>

Mystical Judaism's main text, the Zohar, came after major loss of Jewish lives in Iberia in the 13th century. Hasidism and Reform Judaism after the Chelmininski massacres. Zionism after the failure of emancipation.

It is often the third generation after a crisis when new creativity has emerged. I'll never forget a lecture from the late 1980s when Professor Yerushalmi from Columbia University said that we were entering the 3rd generation after the Shoah and I wondered what would our generation produce?

In fact, the number of new Jewish centers of learning and creativity over the past decades is astonishing and reaching tens of thousands of people: Clal–The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, the Mussar Institute; Hadar Institute empowering Jews to create vibrant egalitarian communities; Institute of Jewish Spirituality; Jews of Color Initiative; The Jewish Outdoor Food Farming & Environmental Education Network; The Rising Tide Mikveh Network; JOIN for Justice - the Jewish Organizing Institute and Network; Svara: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva; and I could go on and on. There is a depth to Jewish life today that didn't exist when this *Ner Tamid* was first lit in this sanctuary. When the famous 1990 national Jewish population study warned of the end of Jewish continuity in America, none of these organizations existed.

This vibrancy is the Judaism that Sarah Hurwitz found inspiring when she decided to figure out what she missed in Hebrew school. In her book, "Here All Along: Finding meaning, spirituality, and a deeper connection to life – in Judaism, after finally choosing to look there," she described her childhood Jewish education:

We were carrying on a timeworn American Jewish tradition whereby a couple of days a week, after regular school ended, tired, restless kids were driven to their families' synagogues, where they sat through another few hours of class during which Jewish educators attempted to teach them to read Hebrew and appreciate an incredibly complex, four-thousand-year-old religion that can be baffling for even the most intelligent adults.

After her unfortunately typical Jewish education (but not at Mount Zion), Sarah left her Judaism behind. Professionally, she dreamed of politics. She could never have imagined that she would end up working for President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama, but that thread of possibility happened. She became the President's chief speechwriter, then decided to serve the First Lady in that role. At some point during the eight years that the Obamas were in office, Sarah took an Intro to Judaism class not out of existential longing but, she admits, from a need to fill a few, lonely hours. That chance decision led to a deeper exploration of Judaism that involved learning from many of the institutions I mentioned earlier.

I bring up Sarah's book not only because it is our community book read and we will be having an online event with her in October, but because her journey is about possibility not probability. By chance, she looked at a thread of connection in her life and decided to find the fire that had always been there. It gave her what so many seek in self-help books, meditation, and other practices.

All of that is authentically in Judaism.

It just takes some effort to find it.

As she writes:

And it turned out that some of the hottest spiritual trends in recent years – practices that have inspired numerous books and TED Talks – have actually been part of Judaism for centuries. The gratitude movement? ... The mindfulness craze? [All in Judaism.] ... It's hard to overstate how surprised I was by these discoveries. None of this was evident to me in the two services I grudgingly sat through each year. And with those occasions as my main points of contact with Judaism, it had never occurred to me to look to it for answers to my big life questions or as a source of meaning and spirituality. I had thought I didn't need religion and that serious engagement with Judaism might be valuable for others, but not for me. It turned out I was wrong.⁴

We are facing significant challenges in our world and the answers how to face them are, like this flame, age-old. The answers are not quick. Judaism is not a simple faith. Neither are our lives. We deserve to be nourished and supported by sophisticated truths. Fortunately, we have inherited a lifeline. It just requires us to turn toward the light and do something.

You could read a book about Judaism. Sarah Hurwitz' *Here All Along* is a good choice. In fact, having an award-winning speechwriter take on the task of explaining Jewish insights, now that is a win for the Jews. If reading isn't what moves you, focus on a mitzvah, a sacred obligation, like providing shelter for those who are homeless while learning Maimonides' laws for caring for the vulnerable. Of course, creating distinctions in time – oh how we all craved this during the pandemic – is so healthy. Try lighting Shabbat candles for three weeks in a row, to see if it can become a habit. Looking at that light in your home will echo the Eternal Light. Find some Jewish music and play it over and over, learn the lyrics and Biblical sources, and experience its depth. Over this pandemic, some of you know, that I fell in love with the soulful music of Hadar's Rising Song Institute whose melodies have become part of our worship along with so many other synagogues. Pick a Jewish podcast and listen to a new episode every Shabbat during a walk out in nature. Chant Torah or join in Torah study or become part of our regulars on Shabbat or Daily services. Meaning doesn't happen in a one-time connection. It takes repetition, creating new habits, learning and forgetting and remembering again.

Go deeper. Try to commit to something significant.

And it doesn't have to be all or nothing. At minimum, tonight, just focus on that thread connecting you to our ancestors all standing on Sinai. May it be a strong enough bridge, however narrow, to support your life and the choices you face.

I want to conclude with what Sarah Hurwitz discovered in Judaism that she loved and which gave her life meaning:

⁴ Here All Along, p. xxii/

I love the idea that we are created in the Divine Image....

I love the way Judaism empowers us...that we ask hard questions, think for ourselves, and push back on immorality wherever we find it, even if that means pushing back on God.

I love Judaism's aversion to dogma – how loyal it is to life's complexity, constantly resisting my attempts to shape it into easy or definitive answers.

I love how countercultural Judaism is – its insistence on hard things, on obligations we didn't choose, on our communal ties rather than just our individual needs. I love that Judaism flies in the face of the strip-mall culture of our time – that depressing array of generic, disposable-quality merchandise – and instead offers something wonderfully durable, enduring, and unique.

I love the primal aspects of Judaism – how we mark our most important holidays by blowing on an animal horn and how holidays start at sundown, prompting us to notice the changing of light and darkness over the course of a year.

I love seeing so many Jewish last names in the ranks of activists and on the rosters of social justice organizations-and I love how, even if they've never read the Torah, so many Jews seem to have absorbed its key message, orienting their hearts toward strangers and embodying the ethic of non-indifference in their lives.

I love our breathtaking story of survival, and I think often of a statistic I came across when working on President Obama's remarks on Holocaust Memorial Day back in 2009. Researchers found that Jews who survived the Holocaust and came to America went on to have more children than Jews who were not survivors. When I shared this fact with a colleague, the human rights activist Samantha Power, who later became Ambassador to the United Nations, she replied: "To think that after all they had endured, they still believed they had a duty to life."

I love how, even when we try to give up on Judaism, it does not give up on us – how, no matter how frustrated or distant we become, something still tugs at us, some thread we did not even realize was there. As a character in a novella by the Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein put it: "Inside me sits the soul of an ancestor who summons me back."

That thread is pulling on us, allowing us to see a light that has always been there. We may be on a narrow bridge, a *gesher tzar m'od* as Nachman of Bratzlav called it in Hebrew. That is true. May we not be afraid to take a step forward, supported by our ancestors and God, and their enduring wisdom.