

The Paths of the Hopeful

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker – Kol Nidre 5783 – Mount Zion Temple, St. Paul, Minnesota

I want to begin a bit lighter than I typically do with my Kol Nidre sermon. I looked back over the years and every one begins with a very serious line. Literally every single one. Full warning; I'm not letting us off the hook. We're going there, but not yet.

One might think, when would be a time for a thoughtful look at where we are as a people and a country if not tonight? But I have a sense as we enter 5783 that we are tired of heaviness. We are weary. We need comfort. Our patience for self-improvement is worn a bit thin. Our zeal for saving the world is just a tad tarnished.

We just want to be, or we don't even know what we want. Life has been a series of triaging and negotiating decisions, dealing with the pandemic as if we were each an epidemiologist, cleaning crew, judge, and jury all wrapped in one. There I go again. I guess I got serious sooner than I wanted to.

Alright I'll tell a joke:

I recently heard about an usher for the high holy days. He greeted an elderly woman who was visiting. He gave her a prayer book and walked her into the sanctuary.

He asked her very politely, "Where would you like to sit?" She answered: "The front row, please."

"You sure you want to do that?" the usher asked. "The rabbi is a little boring."

The woman said, "Do you happen to know who I am?" "No," he said.

"I'm the rabbi's mother," she replied indignantly.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked sheepishly.

"No," she said.

"Good!" he replied as he walked away.

I wanted to ease us into what I am about to say - and I pray this won't be boring – and also that our weary souls will be able to hear this message.

If we are honest, looking at the tea leaves if not the news, it feels like we are in 2022 on the edge of a precipice.

As challenging as things are today, there are reasons to imagine things getting so much worse in the next few years.

You know the awful litany:

- Climate catastrophe.
- A national reckoning with race and an ever-increasing class divide.
- America's eroding democracy and the shrinking of civic religion that binds us together.
- Autocracies, namely Russia and Iran, willfully sowing terror and destruction, raising the specter of larger conflict and eroding global cooperation that was the hallmark of the end of the 20th century.
- The steady rise of antisemitism to levels not seen since the Shoah.

Keep breathing. I'll stop there.

I am an optimist by nature and even I must work to cultivate hope, I feel obligated to say that we cannot be naïve. In the cycles of history, the world today is getting more dangerous.

Tonight is not about how to address any of these forces of change that are greater than us; it is about how we create a personal practice of resilience and lean on the resources of our tradition.

And tonight is THE appropriate night to stare starkly at reality. If Rosh Hashanah is *hayom harat olam*, the day of the world's birth – as I used to say without qualification, Yom Kippur, ten days later, is the day of rehearsing our death.

When all the Torah scrolls were removed from the ark to begin Kol Nidre, we were meant to see the empty ark as waiting for us. The Hebrew word *aron* means both ark and casket. We look unblinking at that emptiness which is recognizing our mortality so that we can make the shifts in our behaviors and perspective to make our life as worthwhile and whole as we can. Abigail Pogrebin, in her book and our community read, *My Jewish Year*, wrote: "In previous years, I hadn't grasped what Yom Kippur entailed, besides a lot of apologies. I'd put in my hours in synagogue, thinking: "This is sufficient. I'm here. I'm listening. I'm reciting. I'm starving. Dayenu." She then learns that the true metaphor of Yom Kippur is about mortality and that the real work is much harder than showing up. She then concludes: "This new Yom Kippur mindset – you could die, so live better – keeps blessings in high relief"¹

So what are the ways to live better, the shifts of perspective and behavior, that can help us stay hopeful even gazing upon the stark landscape I've painted?

I want to offer five paths:

1. Trust in the future.
2. Hold on to a moral compass.
3. Don't give in to easy answers.
4. Lighten up.
5. Pray for safety.

¹ *My Jewish Year: 18 Holidays, One Wondering Jew*, Abigail Pogrebin, Fig Tree Books (Bedford, New York: 2017), pp 50 and 53.

Path One: Trust in the future.

A teaching by Rabbi Ed Feinstein:

I learned my theology from rabbis and professors. But I learned more from my children. When my daughter was small, we had a bedtime routine. Each night I tucked her in, sang prayers, shared a hug, and attempted to sneak out of the room. In a moment, she began to scream.

“Abba! There’s an alligator under my bed! A monster in the closet! A giant spider on the ceiling!” I walked back into her room and looked under bed. “No alligator.” I checked the closet. “No monsters.” I surveyed the ceiling. “No spiders. Now go to sleep. Tomorrow is coming. Everything is safe. Good night.” We did this dance for an entire year until one night I stopped and asked myself: Who is right?

Whose description of the world is factually correct? The child afraid of alligators under the bed, or the father who reassures her that tomorrow is surely coming? The child is correct. She doesn’t know the names of the alligators under the bed. We know. We grown-ups know all about the violence and evil that surrounds us. Yet we still teach our children to trust. All loving parents do this.

Even the most hard-boiled atheist whispers to the child, “Tomorrow is coming, you’re safe tonight, go to sleep.” Kids make us all believers. This is the deep spirituality of parenting.

We all need this. A sense of trust that we are safe tonight and can go to sleep. It is not all up to us; our worries will not help. As Nachman of Bratzlav taught: the whole world is a narrow bridge; *Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar m’od*. The principal thing is, as he wrote originally, “do not be overly afraid.” Don’t freak yourself out. Don’t be more afraid than is warranted. After all, if you are on a narrow bridge, it is appropriate to be a little afraid. That is a natural reaction. What we need to do is be balanced and not react in such a way that will prevent us from moving forward. That is *bitachon*, trust, to be on the narrow bridge and believe you will get to the other side, to sleep well through the night despite the alligators under the bed.

Path Two: Use your moral compass ... but be flexible.

I learned this message from Steven Spielberg’s movie “Lincoln.” There is a scene where the 16th president reflects on a lesson he learned while working as a surveyor. A compass, Lincoln says, will “point you true north from where you’re standing, but it’s got no advice about the swamps and deserts and chasms that you’ll encounter along the way. If in pursuit of your destination you plunge ahead, heedless of obstacles, and achieve nothing more than to sink in a swamp, what’s the use of knowing true north?”

Judaism gives us true north, values and teachings that give us purpose: We are all created in God’s image. We were redeemed from Egypt and will therefore not oppress the stranger in our midst. We see the world as broken and in need of our partnership in repairing it.

This moral compass, however, does not show how we get there. The swamps and deserts of policies and laws in the public square and of the day-to-day decisions with family and friends in the private sphere have pitfalls, are messier, and require negotiation and compromise. The important thing is to keep our moral compass pointing straight north, and to do the hard work of navigating all terrains, listening to opposing voices and finding paths forward that address the issues of the day with fierceness but flexibility.

Path Three: Don't give in to easy answers.

After trusting in the future and using our moral compass, path three comes at a crossroads and suggests a potential danger. This is also based in history, our Jewish history. We all know that our ancestors faced dark days, indescribable hardships, and persecution over the millennia. Knowing is different from feeling. This summer I read a book about Jews in 18th century Poland. When I ordered it after reading a review, I didn't realize it was 960 pages. Reading that much gets the heart to feel what the mind knows. The book is called, *The Books of Jacob* by Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2018 for this book. Tokarczuk is not Jewish but managed to paint an authentic and frightening portrait of a Jewish community facing pogroms and how, slowly and in a way that felt realistic and relatable, smart people started following a man who claimed to be the messiah. This is all based on the true story of Jacob Frank who like his predecessor, the false messiah, Shabbatei Tzvi, had thousands of followers. For years, I couldn't understand how people could give into such ludicrous claims, but seeing some parallels between then and today's challenges has helped me open my eyes. When entire communities suffer, charismatic figures will offer opportunities that may feel good but are not based on "the true north." Their answers may offer structure and even food on the table but are not a sustainable solution and can be dangerous.

Today it is remarkable, for instance, that a significant portion of the Chabad community still believes that their previous leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is the messiah. Some believe that he did not die. This phenomenon has happened a number of times in Jewish history. In this case, however, it has led to an extraordinary network of selfless couples and families giving everything to serve our wider Jewish community including our youth on many college campuses. Their goal may be to bring back the Messiah, and we cannot be blind to differences in beliefs about women's roles, gender roles, and who counts as a Jew, but their actions are in many ways exemplary and are very different from the followers of Jacob Frank.

When things get challenging and we feel powerless, we need to avoid easy answers, escapes, changes to religion that are self-serving or follow cult-like groups or individuals who will mislead and confuse. True answers are not easy. They are about the hard work of character development such as through the ancient spiritual practice of Mussar that helps us be better people for ourselves *and* for others, and the difficult work of *tikkun olam*, repairing our world, through significant action that builds relationships in the broader community for our common good and addresses with creativity and innovation the challenges we are facing.

Path Four: Lighten up

And this brings me to a change of direction, a fourth path, one that you might not expect to hear from a rabbi especially on Kol Nidre: Path four: Lighten Up.

A teaching: A mystic scholar Rabbi Jonathan Omer-man once told Jeremy Kagan, a filmmaker and artist, who was in just a mess after a near-death experience, “Mediate on a feather.” Meditate on a feather, Jeremy Kagan repeated exasperatedly. Ok, feathers are strong, flexible, light weight, ancient (dinosaurs had them) and they are, of course the source of flight.... He kept going on but Rabbi Omer-man saw he was struggling and, with a twinkle, he said, “Lighten up.” Suddenly I got it. Let go of unneeded emotional and psychological brain baggage that weighs you down. His smile encouraged me to be easier on myself and others. To lighten up.

We will face challenging days. Sometimes we can approach that reality with strength and courage with character development and the focused efforts of *tikkun olam*. And some days we can respond with levity. There is a reason Jews have been known for our humor. As Conan O’Brian once reflected. “Today is Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. By the way, Yom Kippur is Hebrew for “I have no writers today.”

We Jews have been known for our humor and also our hope. Last year I focused on this Eternal Light. The pole of the artwork reminds us of a thread, narrow but strong, which is the basis of the word for hope in Hebrew. *Kav* means, “thread” and *tikvah* is “hope.”

As long as there is a thread of possibility, there is reason to hope. As Maimonides taught, it is holding onto the plausibility of the possible, not just the necessity of the probable that gives us hope.

It is possible that we will find a way out of this pandemic soon. It is possible that scientists, politicians, innovators, and activists will make a sufficient dent in our climate crisis. It is possible that Putin will be defeated from within Russia if not from Ukraine. It is possible that young activists in Iran will defy their leaders’ awful crackdowns. It is possible that courageous leaders across the globe will thwart the tide of antisemitism.

Golda Meir said: “Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny, inner sparks of possibility into flames of achievement.”

There are times we need to escape and lighten up; there are times we need to hold onto the possible and act. As William Stafford put it in his poem, *The Way it Is*:

There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can’t get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt

or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

Path Five: Pray for safety even and especially when we are not feeling safe.

This last path is the path of letting go, not of the thread, and not lightening up as an escape, but of the feeling that it is all up to us. It is a return to the first path of trust. If we can hold onto our compass and not give in to easy answers and have a healthy sense of humor, prayer can truly help.

Prayer is music. Prayer is poetry. Prayer is practice. It takes many forms.

It is what allows us to breathe and feel comfort and connection.

A prayer was added to our prayerbook around the 5th century in Babylon at a time when the nighttime evoked fears of physical attacks that were rampant. The words from that time long ago remained throughout the centuries, repeated by many different communities facing different circumstances.

Hashkiveinu is an extension of the daily redemption prayer. At night, especially at night, we feel far from redemption and so we beseech:

הַשְּׂכִיבֵנוּ, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, לְשָׁלוֹם, וְהַעֲמִידֵנוּ שׁוֹמְרֵנוּ לְחַיִּים, וּפְרֹשׁ עָלֵינוּ סִכַּת שְׁלוֹמְךָ,
וּתְקַנְנֵנוּ בְּעֵצָה טוֹבָה מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ. וְהַגֵּן בְּעֵדְנוּ, וְהַסֵּר מֵעֲלֵינוּ
אוֹיֵב, דָּבָר, וְחָרָב, וְרָעָב, וְיָגוֹן, וְהִרְחַק מִמֶּנּוּ עָוֹן וּפְשָׁע. וּבְצֵל כְּנָפֶיךָ תַּסְתִּירֵנוּ, כִּי
אֵל שׁוֹמְרֵנוּ וּמְצִילֵנוּ אַתָּה, כִּי אֵל חַנוּן וְרַחוּם אַתָּה. וּשְׁמֵר צְאֻתָנוּ וּבּוֹאָנוּ לְחַיִּים
וּלְשָׁלֹם מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, שׁוֹמֵר עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעַד.

Grant, O God, that we lie down in peace, and raise us up, our Guardian, to life renewed. Spread over us the shelter of Your peace. Guide us with Your good counsel; for Your Name's sake, be our help. Shield and shelter us beneath the shadow of Your wings. Defend us against enemies, illness, war, famine and sorrow. Distance us from wrongdoing. For You, God, watch over us and deliver us. For You, God, are gracious and merciful. Guard our going and coming, to life and to peace evermore

May we feel that *sukkat shlomecha*, a shelter of peace, as we face enemies, illness, war, famine and sorrow, as we trust nevertheless in the future, as we live a life with a strong moral compass and flexibility in getting to our destination, as we not give into easy answers but work to improve our character and actions, as we try to approach life with levity when times feel dark, and then as we pray, pray with all our spirit that God guard our going and coming to life and to peace evermore.

Cantor Strauss-Klein sings *Hashkiveinu*, music by Danny Maseng.