

Healing and Hope for a New Year  
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Erev Rosh HaShanah 5780

We have sung the words before, but this year they seem different, heavier, more insistent:

*Eil na r'fa na – Oh, please, heal us now.”*

We are in need, O God. This year more than any other, at least to my memory, we are in need.

Six months ago, the world seemed a different place. We had worries and concerns, but on balance, most of us lived life uninterrupted, with at least the illusion of control. Now we live with COVID, with economic uncertainty, and with the growing crisis of racial injustice. To make matters worse, we also live, if such is even possible, with a more intense hyper-partisanship than existed before the virus – pushing the challenge of finding national solutions to all three crises from extremely difficult to seemingly impossible.

We are in mourning for what we have lost, and we are tired from the grind of our new reality. Some of us have lost loved ones and often were not even permitted to visit them in the hospital before they died. Some of us are caught up with the virus now; we may have the illness ourselves or be worried about friends and family who currently suffer from the disease. Yet even if we are physically well, we still suffer. There is so much we all used to take for granted: our routines, our livelihoods, our health; our social outings and family gatherings; our ability to travel, to plan ahead with confidence, to celebrate lifecycles and to mourn our losses in the loving presence of family and friends. Some of us are working so hard that we are close to or even at our breaking point, others have so little to do that life has lost a sense of meaning. And let's not even talk about school!

All of us are in need. Oh, please God, heal us now.

How I wish we were all together in our beautiful synagogue right now, shaking hands and schmoozing, singing and praying, refreshing our spirits and looking forward to the New Year. And yet, even this, we can no longer take for granted.

We need these High Holy Days more than ever: they remind us that each New year can be a fresh start, a new beginning. And they empower us to be that change. Even as we celebrate online and in our homes, these Days of Awe offer us the opportunity for growth and change - just as they have in the past. However, because our world is no longer the same, and because we are no longer the same; because our previous certainties have been replaced with uncertainty about almost everything – we will experience the holy days differently this year.

Different does not mean “bad.” It simply means “not what we are used to.”

Tonight, we begin a new year, and throughout these high holy days we will pray that the year 5781 will be a better year than 5780. We will search our souls, consider our actions, look to each other and to heaven for support, and if we are successful, we will enter the New Year with both hope and optimism. That is the gift of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, the gift which we may or may not have taken for granted before, and which can sustain us as we continue onward into uncharted territory.

It's not easy to cultivate hope and optimism in the midst of, well, everything. Sometimes things may seem so bleak that we just want to give up. Yet history has shown, over and again, that we are a stubbornly resilient people. From extenuating circumstance to extenuating circumstance, from one seemingly unsurmountable obstacle to another, we have adapted and persevered.

So what if we cannot be in the synagogue for the high holy days! We are blessed with the technology to gather and celebrate online. So what if online attention spans can be ... sub-optimal ... we can adapt. And we have .We have streamlined most of our online services, and at least for those that used to be our “main” sanctuary services we have made a significant, even radical change. Instead of offering the full, and rich complement of liturgical themes which run through every high holy day service, we have decided to focus each service on a single and different high holy day theme, removing every prayer (no matter how beautiful)

which does not somehow relate to that central concept. From service to service our focus will shift as we highlight and elevate different critical concepts one at a time. Each service and sermon, by itself, will not give us “the answers,” but rather different pieces of the larger puzzle. In this way, we hope that we can facilitate a meaningful journey through these sacred days and emerge on the other side re-energized and ready for the new year.

Tonight, we focus on the new beginning this new year brings, and we seek to cultivate both hope and optimism. Montana State University professor David Henderson distinguishes between hope and optimism. “Optimism,” he writes, “claims everything will be all right despite reality. Hope accepts reality, the poverty of spirit that underlies all fear, instigates all tragedies bureaucracy and institutional inertia.”<sup>1</sup>

Tonight, we begin our annual process of strengthening our spirits, of overcoming our fears, of looking reality square in the eye and charting our path forward. Hope is a central pillar of Jewish tradition. It is no mistake that the Israeli national anthem is *Hatikvah*, literally, “the hope.” Every year at this time, our tradition invites us to look at ourselves with honesty, to consider the realities of our actions and our relationships; it invites us to celebrate our successes and learn from our failures; it inspires us to imagine the ways we can reach towards becoming our higher selves and to take action to make our hopes for the new year our reality. Our hope stems from our ability to grow and effect change in our lives.

Yet, there is also room for an optimism of sorts – not the reckless optimism Professor Henderson warns against, but something else altogether. If Jewish hope is about the realistic personal actions we can take to examine the present normal and make it better, then Jewish optimism reminds us that we are not alone, that we are in an eternal covenantal relationship with God. This is not an optimism divorced from reality – after all, despite everything, we are still here. Instead, it is an optimism drawn from what in Hebrew is called *emunah*, faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson, David, “Optimism vs. Hope,” Jan. 16, 2013 <http://www.couragerenewal.org/optimism-vs-hope/>

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me.”<sup>2</sup> This verse from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is among the most well known passages translated from Hebrew Bible into English. For countless generations, our people have turned to this verse in times of distress. You may be surprised to discover, however, that the translation is incorrect. The monks who originally worked on the King James Bible were brilliant, but they were stymied by one word in this verse: *tzalmavet*. They had never seen the word before, and because two words were sometimes smushed together to look like one in the ancient scrolls, they decided to separate it into two separate words: *tzal* which means “shadow” and “*mavet*” which means death. However, it is not two separate words, but one, and what it actually means is “dark, narrow place.” This is far more frightening. David, the psalmist, describes being in that place where the world is closing in, and all seems dark – where there is no wide space to run and therefore no path of escape. It is in this context, in this terrible and dark place, where David then says: “I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” Speaking these words, David seeks to overcome his deep discouragement and fear, and the strength to somehow find his way through.

If we have lived long enough, each and every one of us has been in that dark and narrow place at least once, where even our hope in ourselves has been squelched. Many of us experience the world of COVID in exactly this way, and we may be close to giving in to the despair, or we may already be there.

For many of us, the optimism of *emunah* is far more difficult to cultivate than hope in ourselves. Yet this is nothing new. The generation which built the Golden Calf was the same generation which weeks before had witnessed the Plagues in Egypt and walked through the parted sea on dry land. If they struggled then how much the more so do we?

Enter the High Holy Days. Regardless of whether our lives are filled with light and freedom, or we feel confined to the dark narrow spaces, these holy days offer us the opportunity to strengthen both our hope and our optimism, and they remind us that we need both. Through *tefillah*, worship, we can repair and strengthen our spirits and our optimism, our sense that even while we struggle or feel alone, God

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 23:4 (excerpt)

is with us. For me, this means not only expressing my innermost pleas for what I cannot control, but also asking for help cultivating my own strength, patience, compassion, clarity, and commitment. Through *teshuvah*, the honest examination of our actions and our limits, and the determination to make better choices in the next year, we strengthen our sense of hope, our faith in ourselves and in each other.

This is our path forward, and this is what each successive service during these holy days is specifically designed to help us achieve, step by step. We may not be able to make the virus suddenly disappear, but we can discover how to live more meaningfully with it. We may not be able to magically overcome the hyper-partisan political divide or make racial injustice a plague of the past, but we can take concrete steps to try to heal our great divides – even if it is just with our friends and neighbors for now. The problems we face as a nation, as a community and as individuals are serious and proliferate. Yet, there is much we can celebrate in this new year – whether it is the extraordinary establishment of full diplomatic relations between Israel and both the UAE and Bahrain, or it is our own 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation. We are not without power, or agency. We can help to make the year 5781 a better year than 5780.

So I pray, that with God's help, we make the most of these Holy Days. That we dedicate ourselves anew through our prayers and our deeds to the challenging and rewarding process of reflection and renewal these days offer, so that we emerge on the other side with both hope and optimism, ready to do our part to make our prayers come true.