

Kol Nidrei 5781/2020
Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA
Virtual services
Rabbi Rachel Putterman

It is my great honor to be with you all tonight. It's probably a little less strange for me than it is for you to be together virtually, since nearly all of my interactions with this community so far have been on Zoom! Nevertheless, it's strange. Everything is strange right now; nothing is as we expected or hoped for. I find some solace in simply acknowledging the abnormality of everything. Because sometimes when I find myself caught up in whatever my new normal is—grocery shopping while wearing a mask, having a meeting over Zoom, filling out my daughter's health attestation before school—I catch my breath when I realize how much things have changed.

Yet we've adapted. How are we able to continue on with our lives, especially in the midst of so much loss and so many unknowns? The answer is at least in part purely biological; like all living creatures we're adaptable by nature. But the other part of the answer is our unique ability to perceive a future that is different from our today. We power through whatever is happening because we can glimpse the possibility of an end to our current hardships.

There are other completely valid reactions to existential threats that fall short of such imagining. One is denial: "The virus isn't that bad, it's like the flu, the climate changes over time anyway, what's a couple of degrees—winters feel colder to me . . ." Denial makes total sense when facing a reality that feels so overwhelming as to be incomprehensible. Anna Freud was the first to describe denial as a defense mechanism that protects our psyches from information that is too traumatic to process. I certainly experienced a bit of denial at the beginning of the pandemic when I just couldn't wrap my head around the danger that was bearing down on all of us. As understandable as it may be, the practical implication of protracted denial is that the physical laws of the universe march on and we do nothing to alter their course.

Another common response when going through tough times is pessimism. The attitude that everything is "going to hell in a handbasket" anyway, so why should I wear a mask or recycle: we're all doomed regardless. While I skirt around feelings of hopelessness, I can't dwell in that frame of mind for too long. Call it hubris, idealism, or foolishness, but I refuse to accept that I'm powerless to change the outcome, no matter how dire the predictions.

If denial and pessimism are out, what about optimism, you may be thinking. Isn't that the ideal response to challenging times—the unshakable belief that things will get better? Well, not really. Pessimism and optimism are just two sides of the same coin. They both presume the certainty of the future, whether good or bad. For pessimists, the end of the world as we know it is clear—and there is nothing we can do about it. Optimists are equally clear that everything is going to be just fine—whether we take action or not. The problem with pessimism and optimism is that the end is preordained, leaving us with no role to play in how things turn out.

In rabbinical school, we spend an inordinate amount of time studying Jewish texts: the Bible, Talmud, halachah, philosophy. As a kind of afterthought, we take a couple of classes on how to officiate at a Jewish funeral, wedding or b'nei mitzvah. As an appendix to the afterthought, we take one class on pastoral care, on the fine art of being with people who are experiencing loss of one kind or another. The first day of my pastoral care class, the teacher explained that providing pastoral care to people involved “embodying hope.” I was immediately struck by this phrase: that’s what I want to do! That’s why I went to rabbinical school! I want to embody hope for people!

But it wasn’t until I was interviewing for a chaplaincy internship that I was forced to articulate what “embodying hope” means for me. On a piece of paper, I drew a circle and then I drew a bigger circle around the first circle. Pointing to the inside of the inner circle I said, “This is what we know.” Then I pointed to the area between the inner and outer circles, and I said, “This is what we don’t know.” I believe that embodying hope is being inside both circles with people who are suffering: being fully present with what we do know while simultaneously creating space for what we don’t know about the future. It doesn’t mean that I am either optimistic or pessimistic. For example, it doesn’t mean that I presume that someone with cancer will die—or get better—it means that I hold the space for the future being different than the present moment. As difficult as it may be to accept, the truth is that we literally never know what the next moment will bring. That is the problem with both optimism and pessimism: they fail to acknowledge the ever-changing nature of reality and the precarious elasticity of our existence. Since our collective future right now is perhaps more unclear than it’s ever been, the need for embodied hope is greater than ever before.

I believe that hope—embodied and otherwise—is the answer to the question as to how we continue to engage in our quotidian lives amidst all the uncertainty and devastation surrounding us. If we thread the needle of optimism and pessimism we arrive in the land of hope: a place that acknowledges difficult realities and recognizes complexity while refusing to surrender to an idea of the inevitable. Hope requires a leap of faith and a healthy dose of imagination. And arguably, it is hope that has fueled the survival of the body politic of Judaism throughout the millennia.

Rebecca Solnit is a prolific author of many books including *Hope in the Dark*, which was originally published in 2004. In a section of the book entitled “The Branches Are Hope, the Roots are Memory,” Solnit articulates hope’s relationship to memory:

Though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past. We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation. A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope.

As I read Solnit's formulation of hope as future oriented yet rooted in a connection and relationship with memory, I couldn't help but think of our own Jewish story. Our Torah writ large, not just the five books but the writings and prophets as well, serves as a recorded recollection of our shared past. It unstintingly recounts our formation as a people in direct relationship with God and all the ups and downs along the way. The beauty of Torah is that it is profoundly complicated; it includes the best and the worst of our patriarchs and matriarchs as well as the many atrocities and liberations that we experienced as a people. These complex Torah stories of grief and jubilation form the very bedrock of our tradition. We study them endlessly and they inform our commemorative holidays.

The shared memory that is the focal point for much of Torah is our enslavement and exodus from Egypt. This year, I drew real comfort and strength from the haunting parallel of conducting Passover seders during lockdown and the Passover story's night of terror where the Israelites hid in their houses as the angel of death passed them by. Hope arises from staying connected to our complex memories. When we find ourselves in similarly untenable situations, we realize that this happened before, it will happen again, and we will survive. Hope is the animating force that allows the impossible to become possible.

A few weeks ago we read one of the last parashiyot in Deuteronomy, Nitzavim, where Moses reiterates the blessings or curses that will befall the Israelites depending on whether they uphold their end of the covenantal bargain. At the end of the parashah is the famous line:

I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—so that you and your descendents will live—by loving the Lord your God, heeding God's commands, and holding fast to God.

These verses have echoes in our High Holy Day liturgy with the imagery of God inscribing us in the Book of Life, or not. Indeed, tradition has it that these next twenty-four hours are our last chance to impact our fate before the book is sealed. According to the Unetaneh Tokef, which Cantor Vera will chant tomorrow, our choice in the matter is limited to engaging in sufficient t'shuvah, t'fillah, and tzedakah to avert God's harsh decree. Based on our actions, God is the

one who decides whether we live or die. This is a particularly difficult pill to swallow at any time, but especially during a pandemic.

While the idea of God as the great fate determiner in the sky doesn't work for me, I do think that being confronted with our mortality every year and the urgency that brings up about doing better is constructive. But this year, I'd like to uphold the softer message of "choose life" from Nitzavim, rather than the High Holy Day's Book of Life. My take on "choose life" is that it is intimately related to hope. Our continuity as a people—and even as a species—is impossible unless we have the courage to choose life. Things may seem pretty bleak, hell, they are bleak! We are living through a global pandemic as well as a climate crisis. But to throw in the towel and resign ourselves to the fact that all is lost is not an option. Especially not for us! If we had done that during any one of the many calamities that befell our people we wouldn't be here today! Again, I'm not talking about hope as synonymous with optimism but rather hope as the opposite of resignation. A hope that moves us—inspires us—to exercise our agency by providing us with the space to recognize the complexity of the moment and the impossibility of predicting the future.

Not only that, as an embodied experience, hope is live-giving. In the spacious domain of hope it's much easier to breathe than in the constriction of hopelessness. When I'm feeling despair it's pretty much impossible for me to take a deep breath. Hope gives me the life-sustaining breath and the perspective to be simultaneously present in the inner circle of what we know and the outer circle of what we don't know. So, on this exceedingly strange Yom Kippur, take a deep breath, hold onto hope, and choose life so that our descendents may live.