

The Opposite of Despair: Rosh Hashanah 5785

[Dear Mom and Dad] “If you’re reading this, something must have happened to me...I’m happy and grateful for the privilege I have to defend our beautiful country and Am Yisrael (the Jewish people). Even if something happens to me, I won’t allow you to sink into sorrow...you can be sure that I’m looking down on you and smiling a huge smile...I’m full of pride and a sense of mission. I always said that if I need to die, alas, it should happen while defending others and our country.”

So read the words of Sgt. First Class Ben Zussman, age 22, who was killed in battle in Gaza on December 3, 2023. A competitive ping-pong player and rabid Beitar Yerushalayim fan, so much so that he once stopped eating green foods because that was the color of rival team Maccabi Haifa, Zussman left behind parents Sarit and Tzvi Zussman and younger siblings Mika and Boaz. He was buried at Har Herzl in Jerusalem, surrounded by a sea of gray berets representing the combat engineering corps of which he was a member of the 601st battalion.

One of the heartbreaking artifacts of the Israel-Hamas War is a trove of final letters, messages written by soldiers going off to battle with full knowledge they might never return, last words meant to bring strength and comfort to devastated family and friends in the event that the very worst should happen. These men never wished to be martyrs – they’d have much preferred not to give up their lives and certainly not to take the lives of others either – and yet, when faced with the possibility of death at far too early an age, they nonetheless expressed a sense of duty fulfilled, using their last words to affirm the deep purpose that gave their lives meaning and urging their loved ones to do the same. I can only imagine that these young *chayalim* (soldiers) dreamt of returning home to warm beds, caring families, jobs, friends, rich lives filled with the banal joys of the everyday. But even recognizing that such an outcome might not be possible, still, the strength of their values - the sacred commitments made to communities and ideals far larger than themselves - allowed them to confront the potential of death with a sense of equanimity. The opposite of despair isn’t hope – it’s purpose. Indeed, that is one of the things that brings us here on this holy day of Rosh Hashanah.

I do not need to tell you what an excruciatingly difficult year this has been. Even those of us fortunate enough not to have experienced personal loss in the terrible months since October 7th are shouldering an enormous weight of pain and heartbreak. We mourn for those we never knew but who felt like friends and family nonetheless. We are shattered by the violence of their final hours – huddling terrified in safe rooms, pursued like prey after dancing in the desert, mutilated and laid bare before a captor’s cruel lens. We ache for the families who have sent their spouses and parents and children off to war; we keen over those whose loved ones are, impossibly, still being held hostage after 363 interminable days. The funerals of those killed have wrecked us to our very core.

And there's more. We have been stunned by the vicious antisemitism erupting here in the United States and around the world, blaming the victims still dripping from their wounds before even a single counter-attack had been levied. We have been abandoned by friends whom we thought were our allies, people for whom we showed up in their time of need only to be left alone in ours, and we have been betrayed by our alma maters who have utterly failed to afford Jewish students the same kinds of basic protection extended to every single other minority group in the academic world.

Things only became more complicated, of course, once Israel did what every country has the right and responsibility to do, going to war to ensure the security of its citizens. Attacking an enemy that doesn't give fair fight, that hides amidst tunnels and civilian infrastructure and uses its own people as human shields, made for impossible choices, many of them distorted by journalistic bias and amplified through the slanted lens of social media. It also caused the kind of death and destruction that is, to our great sorrow, inevitable in this kind of a conflict. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza and death of so many innocent Palestinians, including large numbers of children, pains us deeply. Many of us are desperate for an end to this war - to bring the hostages home, to bring our soldiers back to safety, to bring respite and relief to Gaza and the West Bank. Yet this week has instead brought with it further escalation, as another front of the conflict opened up in Lebanon only to be followed by a terror attack in Tel Aviv and, most alarmingly, a large-scale missile assault from Iran. Instead of preparing for Rosh Hashanah and the searing *yahrzeit* of October 7th in relative calm, Israel is thrust again into chaos, fear, and uncertainty. We are right there along beside them.

And that's not even all. Over the last many months, some have become furious at the Israeli government, whose leadership is certainly not helping us to win sympathy in the eyes of other nations, and disappointed at the failure of trusted organizations (including this synagogue) to adopt a more nuanced and critical stance towards Israel. Others feel passionately that the only thing a good Zionist can do at a moment of crisis, particularly when the world has largely turned against us, is to support Israel proudly and unequivocally. Disunity and strong anti-government sentiment are rampant in Israel – where protests have been roiling on the streets for months – and it's rampant here in the United States, too, where the upcoming presidential election is a cause of tremendous anxiety for many on both the left and the right. Some of us can no longer talk to our children about Israel or fear that conversations about American politics will disquiet our holiday tables. Many of us are probably unhappy about at least one of the things said or unsaid in this sermon so far! There are so, so many different reasons for despair this year. We come to the High Holidays with heavy hearts, seeking hope and healing.

Our own Rabba Tamar Elad-Applebaum, former second rabbi at TIC, tells the story of her very first Shabbat in Jerusalem after October 7th. She hadn't even had time to dress or get ready for services; she walked into shul with a big ball of yellow ribbon that she was readying to make hostage pins for the Zion community. She was distracted, and tearful, and utterly unprepared to begin leading the community in prayer until a little boy tugged at her skirt and asked quietly, "Rabba Tamar, isn't Shabbat a day about hope? Are we even allowed to celebrate it anymore

now that things are so bad?” In that moment, as she describes it, Rabbi Elad-Applebaum came back to herself and the needs of the day and got down to work. Purpose pushed her out from the depths of despair.

Rabbi Elad-Applebaum teaches that the root of the Hebrew word *tikvah* (hope) is *kav* which means line, a line which Israeli author David Grossman pictures as an anchor, extending from a dark, scary, unknown place towards something far better and brighter. In his words, “When the anchor is cast, it takes hold of the future, and human beings – sometimes an entire society – begin to pull themselves toward it.” Hope in this sense is not naïve or Pollyannaish – not empty boosterism or a saccharine sweet mindset that we simply will ourselves into – hope is active and dynamic and galvanized by the belief that our behaviors have the ability to bring about change in this world for the good. This, too, is the message of the High Holiday season.

The Torah and Haftarah readings for the first days of Rosh Hashanah are all about individuals in dire circumstances who nonetheless pull themselves out of the depths of despair through an abiding sense of purpose. Hagar, in the throes of depression as she watches Ishmael about to die from lack of water, is roused by the words *I’goy gadol asimenu* – I will make [of your son] a great nation (Genesis 21:18) – causing her to see possibility (and a well of water) where before there had been none. Hannah, faced with the crushing disappointment of infertility, cures her broken heart and brings about the child for whom she has so yearned through fervent prayer and a promise to make her son, should he be born, a Nazirite. A steadfast sense of spirituality and trust in God gives her the strength to endure another day, spurred on by the unshakeable belief that she is meant to be a mother.

Even the Akkedah (the Binding of Isaac), a story which is terribly uncomfortable for many of us, feels different to me this year. Hartman scholar, Dr. Micah Goodman, points out that what we live for in this world is often precisely that which we are willing to die for, an insight which perhaps helps us to better understand Abraham’s devastating choice in this episode. For Abraham to slay his son on the altar would have been crushing, but he ultimately believed that this sacrifice, should it have occurred, would have been for the purpose of establishing the Israelite religion and covenant with God whose impact would ultimately be felt long and far beyond the confines of his one little family. I, personally, struggle with Abraham’s choice here and don’t quite understand God for asking him to make it. But the idea of being willing to undertake an agonizing personal sacrifice for the sake of something greater is something that I deeply admire.

Purpose can pull us out of the pits of despair, motivate us to fight against improbable odds, and even lead us to risk the things most precious for the sake of something greater. It is the anchor by which we pull ourselves towards a brighter future.

Friends, I wish I could tell you today that things in our world are only going to get better, but I'm no prophet nor do I believe in the promise of false hope and, if I'm being honest, I think there's a good chance that things may indeed get worse for the Jewish people before they ultimately improve. The months since October 7th have been so utterly destabilizing not only because of the terrible traumas we've endured but also because the events of that day (and ever since) completely shattered basic assumptions upon which we've relied and organized our lives. Our once belief that the State of Israel, the Jewish homeland founded so that our people would always be safe, could keep its citizens out of danger. The idea that we, as American Jews, were fully integrated here in the United States and seen as equal, valued, and protected members of broader society. The notion that Israel, despite its many vulnerabilities, could ever cease to exist. The promise of a homeland that was Jewish, democratic, and based on highest values. The dream that someday, God willing, there would be peace in the Middle East. All of these realities feel farther away than ever before. It is going to take tremendous resilience, spirit, and hard, dedicated work to build a strong and secure future.

What I can say is that we, as Jews, have endured many terrible periods throughout our long history, that we've emerged each and every time into a new era of creativity and growth, and that I believe it is our community's commitment to sacred purpose that has allowed this to be so. The rabbis mourning the destruction of the Second Temple channeled their love of learning and community into reinventing Judaism as we know it and crafting the laws, rituals, and practices that have now defined and fortified our people for over two millennia. After the horror and decimation of the Holocaust, we devoted ourselves to founding a new Jewish state and seeding vibrant centers of Jewish life - both in Israel and the Diaspora - ushering in one of the most innovative and productive periods that Jewish history has ever seen. The expulsion of Sephardic Jews led to the creation of Kabbalah; Hasidic Judaism emerged from the aftermath of the Chelmnitsky massacres. Time and time and time again, our pledge to meet devastation with a renewed commitment to grow, to build, to assert the rightness of our values and the dignity of our people has allowed us to move forward in strength. Purpose has pulled us back from the brink of despair.

And so I wish to close this morning with the words of some members of our community - individuals that I reached out to before the holiday, asking where they have been finding purpose during these difficult days. They write:

"Being Jewish in and of itself has given me purpose...I feel proud of my heritage and to belong to this noble people. I put on a Magen David (Star of David) after 10/7 and it reminds me...I am a part of this whole. We are all tied together and only together will we succeed."

"I'm...finding purpose and meaning in *smachot* [celebrations] because we can and should celebrate when we have a happy occasion or milestone to mark. For the first few events following October 7th, it felt uncomfortable and callous to focus on decor, music, or food, but the first hora... I participated in [after] that tragic day was cathartic and even more joyous than ever before. As the war goes on and tensions escalate...I am gaining perspective about what is truly important: NOT the decor, music and food, but the Jewish people celebrating life together."

"I'm finding meaning and purpose in the next generation. The generation of kids who have had to grow up so fast given the events of October 7th. The kids who have had to engage in difficult and emotional conversations that as a parent you would hope they would do when they were a bit older and have had more life experiences. The beauty, innocence and logic (albeit simple) in which they approach the world gives me some hope that one day our world will be in good hands."

"I'm writing this on 9/11 and nearly a year after 10/7. I feel like evil is all around us, horrible sickening attacks on life. But we saw on 9/11 and we still see [today] so many in Israel and Gaza who are tormented by evil...and [yet] have given so much of themselves to help others to make this a better world. These acts of courage in giving so much of themselves gives my life meaning."

"Demonstrating, rallying, speaking out! Standing alongside Israelis, Israeli-Americans and Americans to demand a return of the hostages, to demand that corrupt and evil leaders in the Israeli government step down, to demand that...all...organizations acknowledge and call out the atrocities of October 7th."

And finally: "I try to concentrate on the simple but remarkable things which give me hope: the love of another person and of family, the joy of participating in the growth and development of grandchildren, the professional satisfaction in what I do, and the daily blessings of friends and the strong community in which we live. These thoughts give me purpose and fuel the will to 'keep moving' with the hope that somehow, we will find answers to the overwhelming challenges of our times."

The opposite of despair is purpose and far from being naive or pollyanna-ish, it is brave and vital and gives us the strength to pull ourselves, hand over exhausted hand, towards better times. And so, this Rosh Hashanah I charge each of us to articulate our purpose for the coming year, not because **we** need it - spiritually, emotionally, psychologically (although this is undoubtedly true) but because **the Jewish people** need it - it is the only way we will make it through this terrible time and emerge into something better. Next week on Kol Nidre night I will share where I'm finding my sense of purpose these days and what I think the purpose of our holy community here at TIC might be. I will also share, over email, the many other wonderful responses that I got to this question - far too many, unfortunately, to all fit into one short sermon.

I close with a final reflection from one of our members:

"What I really need to keep going... [is] faith. Faith in, among other things, the strength of Israel to exact justice against Hamas, faith in the leadership of Israel to chart a path forward that assures Israel's future security, faith that a permanent peace with Israel's neighbors could be achieved some day. Faith in a future world without antisemitism...faith that belief in God and living a life of mitzvot matters, faith in the humanity of most people; in sum, faith in a better world in the future."

Ken y'hi ratzon - may this indeed be true. Wishing us all a year filled with sacred purpose.
Shana Tova!