

Geography of Hope
Rosh Hashanah 1 ~ 1 Tishrei 5785 ~ 3 October 2024
Rav Baruch Frydman-Kohl
Kehillat Beth Israel, Ottawa

I heard the first shofar of Elul at the Goldberg-Polin shivah. I was davvening with Jon, Rachel and their daughters, Orly and Leebie, after the execution of their son, Hersh, and 5 other hostages. The plaintive cry of the shofar resonated with much of the pain and upheaval of the past year.

Throughout this season, we recite Psalm 27. It begins with a sense of security. Then the poem shifts to fear and uncertainty. Our lived experiences during this past year mirror the literary dynamic of this psalm. Prior to this year, Jews felt a greater sense of security. Now, anxiety dominates our conversations.

Our world was turned upside down following the violent and brutal Hamas invasion of October 7 with its brutal burnings and killings, sexual violence and the taking of hostages. At first, Israel became a country united. As time went on, Israel again became politically divided, with ever-present uncertainty. Now, intensified conflict with Hizbollah has led to missile attacks from Lebanon and Iran. And still, our people are held hostage.

Jewish life changed here, too. Marchers shouting "From the river to the sea" have now begun to chant "From Palestine to Lebanon, Israel will soon be gone." Jewish students and faculty are under siege. Schools have failed to protect Jewish students from anti-Zionist hate. Firebombs and bullets, anti-Israel signage, verbal violence and physical attacks have increased on our streets.

We have watched and listened as governments have opposed antisemitism, declared support for Israel's right of self-defense and then added the word "but".

Look at the last line of Psalm 27. After initial confidence and following fearful anxiety, the psalm concludes: *וַיִּאֲמָץ לִבִּי וְקִוִּיָּה אֶל־ה'* *Wait, Hope for the Eternal: be strong of heart and wait, hope for the Eternal.*

The word *קִוִּיָּה* comes from the same root as *תִּקְוָה*. Hope. How do we regain hope after this year? How do we regain hope when our personal dreams have been shattered? What is the role of hope when facing serious illness? What might we hope for when our loved ones die? What hopes might be hold despite deep family conflict?

The stem of *תִּקְוָה* is the same root as for the word *מִקְוָה*, a pool of water for ritual renewal. **Hope is renewing.** The rabbis identify God as *מִקְוָה יִשְׂרָאֵל*. Hope is **spiritual strength**. The first agricultural school in Israel was established on the edge of Tel Aviv. It is called *מִקְוָה יִשְׂרָאֵל*. **Hope is what we build and construct with others.**

תִּקְוָה also means “a stretched out cord or rope.” So *קִוִּיָּה* is “the tension of enduring or waiting” and can be translated as “Wait”. That stretched-out cord is a synecdoche for hope. Hope waits, tense, but doesn’t break. Hope is a rope. As Jews, we have a **rope of hope** that can hold and support us during times of challenge.

Our Torah tradition and teaching has the capacity to construct a haven of hope for our community and our lives. The great historian, Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi z”l, understood that one cannot explore how Jews lived with hope without examining Jewish despair. Only when we realize how anxious and fearful our ancestors were, can we begin to comprehend the significance of their response.

The Bible describes the conquest of the Northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians. Subsequently, the danger from the Babylonians against the southern kingdom of Judah. Many abandoned the covenant. But the prophet Jeremiah offered a “prototypical act of hope”.

Before the city was overrun by the Babylonians, Jeremiah bought a field in Anatot, on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

I signed the deed...and weighed the money on scales. Then I [said]... Thus says the Eternal: Take these deeds...and put them in an earthenware jar...to last for a long time. For thus says the...God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. (Jer 32: 9-15).

Directed by God's vision of the future, Jeremiah's purchase was a rope of hope despite despair.

A midrash discusses changing the language of prayer because of religious doubt. Moses described God as "great, mighty, and awesome" ~~ ה-א-ל "הגדול הגבור והנורא" (Dt 10:17), but Jeremiah said: The troops of Nebuchadnezzar are in the Sanctuary; how can I say that God is awesome? Daniel experienced exile and enslavement in Babylonia; he questioned God's might.

But a later generation reframed God's strength as patience. Divine awesomeness was demonstrated through the survival of the Jewish people. They placed this phrase at the opening of the Amidah. Every time we recite the words ה-א-ל הגדול והנורא, we affirm that despite the challenges we face, God will continue to be with us.

In the year 70, all of the major institutions of Jewish life were destroyed. Prophets — gone. Country — occupied. Revolt against Rome — crushed. Temple — destroyed. People thought that they should be permanent mourners. "When the Jewish people faced... the deepest despair... many succumbed.... [saying] 'God is totally removed from us.'"

But a small group did not succumb. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai extended a rope of hope to Jews of the generation of destruction: Prayer. Tzedakah. Teshuvah. Hesed.

That structure of prayer, ritual and ethics sustained the people of Israel without the Temple. "This... ability to rise from the ruins, to recreate, to transpose values into new channels, to achieve a future where no future

seems possible any more... [runs] through Jewish history...This capacity to sustain hope... is extraordinary and mysterious....”

The earliest evidence of Jewish presence in Iberia is a 2nd-century gravestone found in Mérida. Jews lived in Spain for a millennium, but in March 1391, anti-Jewish rioting broke out in Seville and spread throughout the country. Thousands were killed. Some estimate that up to 200,000 individuals converted to Christianity. One hundred years later, all Jews were expelled.

In the years before the expulsion, Jews were compelled to listen to Christian sermons. Rabbi Yitzhak Arama reported that he learned from them and adjusted his teaching from an emphasis on the mind to the heart, stressing faith and fidelity, deed over doctrine. This approach, which was adopted by other Spanish rabbis in the mid-1400s became a rope of hope for spiritual strength and subsequent survival.

Spanish and Portuguese Jews who made their way to Amsterdam contributed to the establishment a new world of freedom of commerce and conscience. Sephardic refugees made their way to Poland, which became known as “heaven for the Jews.” Others became traders in the Ottoman Empire.

Migrants who reached the Land of Israel helped to develop a world of mystical ritual and faith, law and practice, homilies and holiness. Jews responded to loss by adaptation and affirmations of life. They sought what Pierre Birnbaum called a “geography of hope”.

The "geography of hope" was not only for economic opportunity. We sought societies that were tolerant and we framed the conditions of life to give our dispersion and defeat meaning. International instability and bellicose nationalism have never been good for us — or anyone else. Antisemitism weakens national stability.

Jews developed a "midrash of history" which allowed us to burrow "beneath the surface of events to find inner meaning or even invisible triumphs in the wake of what otherwise might seem to be examples of defeat." We fostered "interim Jewish hopes" to sustain us. Our liturgy and ritual were "sources and salves" for continued resilience.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observed,

By discovering the God who created the universe in love, [Jews] became the first practitioners of hope. ...No Jew who knows his or her history can be an optimist. We have seen too many great civilisations – ancient Egypt, the Roman Empire, medieval Spain and pre-War Germany – lapse into barbarism and murderous hate.

Hope is neither naïve optimism nor false certainty.

Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope.

Knowing what we do of our past, no Jew can be an optimist. But Jews have never – despite a history of sometimes awesome suffering – given up hope.

Years ago, I was in shul when the President of the State of Israel, Chaim Herzog was called to chant haftarah. It was on Pesah, when the words of the prophet Ezekiel are read:

"O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel.

They say, **אֲבָדָה תִּקְוַתְנוּ וְאֲבָדָה עֲצָמוֹתֵינוּ**,

Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost; we are doomed.'

Our hope is lost. **אֲבָדָה תִּקְוַתְנוּ**.

But Ezekiel continued:

Prophecy, therefore, and say to them...

I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel. I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. And, in 1878, Naftali Herz Imber of my father's home city in Galicia, composed a poem that became a song. He reversed the words of Ezekiel — עוֹד לֹא אֶבְדָּה תִּקְוַתְנוּ, Our hope is not lost.

On April 20, 1945, survivors of Bergen-Belsen gathered for a Shabbat service days after their liberation. With people still dying around them they sang Hatikvah. "Our hope is not yet lost." Hope drove our people to rise from the ashes of the Holocaust. We did not wait to see what the future would bring; we created a future for ourselves.

The determination to establish a Jewish state became a moral imperative. This was an example of sanctifying life. Despite the false ideology of some religious extremists, Israel is not a messianic kingdom. It is a nation-state with acclaimed accomplishments and constant challenges.

The Hamas attack of October 7 undermined an accepted perspective that Israel was secure and that the IDF would deter its enemies. The war against Hamas and now with Hizbollah has sought to reestablish that security. The situation in the north remains unstable, intolerable and volatile, but the beeper and walkie-talkie explosions, as well as the precision bombing of Hezbollah leaders, reasserted the capacity of the army and offered Israelis a breeze of hope.

We have to ensure that Canadian leaders and western allies understand that Iran's use of proxies against Israel, assassination attempts in Europe, and efforts to destabilize American elections, are indicative of a deep danger. This requires international attention and action. With nuclear arms, who knows what Iran would seek to do.

Over the past century, Jewish-Arab conflict has oscillated between a national one of competing interests and one based on religion. Peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan reflect national interests. Unfortunately,

religious beliefs driving Hamas, Houthis and Hezbollah, as well as their sponsor, Iran, don't offer much possibility of compromise. More moderate Muslim states entered into the Abraham Accords, based on interests, offering a measure of hope.

In Canada, allies — in business, government and among Christians — have begun to understand that anti-semitism threatens the stability of our country. We must reach out to support them as courageously raise their voices. Encourage them to tenaciously hold onto that rope of hope.

As members of our community stand up to defend our interests and protect our safety, something else is happening. A surge of interest in Judaism has begun. More Jews have begun to express pride in our identity, seek deeper knowledge of our tradition, engage more often with Jewish practice. “We shall dance again” — a Boston celebration organized by Leora Kimmel — is a cultural example of what can excite young Jews. And more non-Jews are interested in becoming Jews. There is a rope of hope waiting.

In our own lives, by focusing on our limited capacity for personal peace and moments of joy, we can foster “interim hopes”. Breathing, walking, time with trusted friends. if blessed, special moments with family. We may not be able to resolve the bigger challenges, but we can create our own “geography of hope.”

Last month in Jerusalem, as hundreds of us stood together grieving the executions of the six hostages, we softly sang the words of Naomi Shemer:

נָטוּעַ תִּעֲקַר נָא אֶל
הַתְּקוּהָ אֶת תִּשְׁכַּח אֶל
Restore me and I shall return to this good land.
הַטּוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ אֶל וְאֲשׁוּבָה הַשִּׁיבֵנִי

We slowly sang **Hatikvah**. עוד לא אבדה תקותנו. It takes courage to hope. But we have the spiritual resources in Judaism to strengthen ourselves for the tasks ahead of us.

At the *shivah* for Hersh, with the quiet dignity that he and Rachel brought to their all efforts to save their son, Jon Polin said to me: “We have lost our son, but we will not lose our hope.”

הָתָהּ-אֶל-יְקִיָּה לִבְרַךְ וַיֵּאמְרָם חֲזִק הָתָהּ-אֶל-יְקִיָּה

Wait, Hope for the Eternal: be strong of heart and wait, hope for the Eternal. Hold onto the rope and hope.

References for Geography of Hope:

<https://jps.org/books/choosing-hope/>

<https://media.rabbisacks.org/20220921171903/Communities-in-conversation-2022-Resources-From-Optimism-to-Hope-global-day-cinc.pdf>

<https://www.exploringjudaism.org/holidays/rosh-hashanah/rosh-hashanah-sermon/hope-is-a-rope-rosh-hashanah/>

<https://www.exploringjudaism.org/holidays/rosh-hashanah/rosh-hashanah-sermon/hope-is-a-rope-rosh-hashanah/>

<https://billmoyers.com/content/yosef-yerushalmi/>

"Toward a History of Jewish Hope," in

<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/F/bo43630632.html>