

Casting Light Into a Darkened Ark
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 5770
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Rabbi Charles K. Briskin

A man has twin sons. One is always pessimistic, the other optimistic. Their birthday was coming up and he wanted to give them gifts and observe them opening their gifts as well. He invited a psychologist friend to be with them when they opened their presents. He gave the pessimistic son the most popular toys—an iPod Nano, Xbox 360, Rock Band Beatles. To the optimistic son, he gave a large pile of horse manure. The father and his friend left for a while to let the boys play with their gifts. When they returned they found his pessimistic son pouting. He wanted the iPhone, not the Nano; Wii, not Xbox. He preferred Metallica to the Beatles. Nothing satisfied him.

Then they saw his optimistic son arms deep in the manure. He was digging around in it, throwing it up in the air, laughing, grinning and having a great time. The psychologist friend had heard about this boy's optimism. But this was bizarre. What joy could be found in a pile of manure? He asked the boy why he was so excited and happy. He merrily exclaimed, "with all this manure, there's gotta be a pony in here somewhere!"

As we begin the year 5770, what do we see? A pile of manure or a pony?

Tonight, I'd like to talk to you about hope. Hope for the present and the future. How can we discover reservoirs of hope that we didn't know existed until we truly need them? What can we do to uplift each other in the midst of our present pain? How do we use hope to keep us alive?

On the first night of Hanukah in a German death camp, an emaciated man took his small ration of margarine and instead of spreading it on stale bread to eat, he used its oil in the Chanukah menorah. His son was aghast. He looked at his father and asked incredulously, "How could you waste your margarine on the *hannukiah*?" "My son," he said, softly. "Man can live a week without food and three days without water. But man cannot live one day without hope. This *hannukiah* represents hope."

Many of us have suffered greatly this past year. However, as long as we maintain our hope, we will endure.

Hope has fueled our community for millennia. Hope has encouraged us to look towards a brighter tomorrow where a new light will shine upon us, especially after we've pulled ourselves out of the muck. It reminds us of the often times cruel cycle of life, when good days are followed by bad days and bad days are followed by good days.

A story of King Solomon articulates this cycle. King Solomon, the wisest man in Israel gave his most trusted aide a difficult task. This aide was to find a special ring that would make a happy man who looks at it become sad, and a sad man who looks at it become happy. The aide searched high and low to no avail, until he came to the modest shop of a

poor jeweler. The aide told the jeweler of his task. This jeweler understood what Solomon needed and made that special ring for the king. The aide returned and gave Solomon the ring. He looked to the inside of the band and found the answer to his question: What can make a happy person sad and a sad person happy? Three words were inscribed on the ring: *Gam zeh ya'avor*—This too shall pass. For those still down and feeling sad, these three words provide hope. “*Gam zeh ya'avor*—This too shall pass” We shall live for another day, a day that hopefully is better than the one before.

That’s what Jews do. We acknowledge that *Gam zeh ya'avor*. This too shall pass. We turn to others who understand our predicament and work together. We use our hope to keep us alive.

I’ve spoken to many people who have endured, or continue to endure, some extraordinary challenges. All who have shared their pain with me have at least three things in common: they have found sanctuary in our community; they have grown and learned from their experiences; they have not lost hope.

Hope, after all, is a core value of the Jewish people. A hopeful person believes that things can become better by working together.¹ We use hope to keep us alive by remaining actively engaged with others. We lose it when we retreat into a shell.

I’ve seen a hopeful attitude sustain a person’s spirits, which in turn has improved their condition, and which in time has enabled them to approach their situation with a greater sense of resolve. *Gam zeh ya'avor*. This too shall pass.

The Hebrew word for hope, *tikvah*, comes from the root, *kava*. This *kava*, this hope, can be exemplified two ways. By the small, frayed “*tikvat hut ha'shani*”, the thin crimson thread that Rahav hung out of her window as a sign to Joshua’s army that she was the friend who protected his scouts when they were endangered during their reconnoitering mission to the city of Jericho, shortly before it was besieged. Rahav’s hope for survival rested in that crimson thread, the “*tikvat hut ha'shani*.” This root word, *kava*, which we hear in the Hebrew word for hope, *tikvah*, can be symbolized, too, by the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, a reservoir of *mayim hayyim*, of living waters, which spiritually nourishes us, renews us and gives us the strength to endure.²

Hope is so integral to the Jewish experience that the Israeli national anthem, composed nineteen hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem and two millennia of exile is called, *Hatikvah*--The Hope. “*Od lo avdah tikvatenu / Hatikvah bat shnot alpayim*—“We have not lost our hope—the two-thousand-year-old hope: To be a free people in our land, The land of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Throughout our darkest days, we’ve always maintained hope, represented by that thin, frayed thread, the bit of margarine, King Solomon’s ring, or that large reservoir we call a *mikvah*.

¹ Rabbi Joshua Heller quoting Rabbi Jonathan Sachs in a book entitled, *From Optimism to Hope*

² The idea of *kav* is attributed to a lesson taught by Rabbi Michael Marmor of HUC-JIR

For those who have gone to a *mikvah*, you know it is a deeply personal experience. You enter it alone. Your experiences are yours alone. Hope, however, shines more brightly within community.

During these Days of Awe we come together to this sanctuary to reflect upon the past year and determine what we need to do to make next year better. Improvement is in our hands. We wipe the slate clean and begin anew. Our tradition inspires us to make changes at this time of year. We make these changes by choice—a career change or a new job. We relocate, we begin a new relationship. We change our habits of work, play, diet, or exercise.

We also make changes under duress, reacting to the tectonic shifts that knock us off our feet. Our shared experiences of loss and despair, and the personal struggles we endure privately and painfully, have forced us to look differently at our radically transformed world. Our priorities are different. Our choices are different. We no longer take anything for granted. Yet through it all, what sustains so many of us simply is hope, and knowing that we don't need to suffer alone.

Think about the past year. Has anything happened that has shaken you? Have your economic realities forced you to make different or difficult choices? Were you afraid of losing your home to foreclosure, or even to fire? Is it tough to make ends meet? Do you worry about sustaining your small business or your practice in the face of diminished revenues? Are you worried about having enough savings for your future?

Maybe your finances are fine, but you're dealing with a health scare that has forced you to change your habits dramatically. Or a significant relationship is in crisis. If you've spent any time during the past year worrying about any of these or other issues, big or small, please raise your hand. Don't be shy.

Do you see how much we have in common!

We're all in the same boat! And we've found sanctuary here at Temple Beth El, on these High Holy Days, aboard our own Zebulon ship. We're a bit shaky, but we're still standing.

Now I could continue to articulate just how tough it was last year, or still is. However, I really want you to come back tomorrow. You didn't come tonight to be brought down. You came to uplifted, to be with your friends within our special, sacred community. We come into this sanctuary to find shelter from the storm. To be comforted through prayer, music and community.

When we come together in this sanctuary, as we do during these High Holy Days and every Shabbat as well, hope endures. We sense this hope when we join for our quiet yet communal moments of prayer. When we say *Mi shebeirach l'r'fuah*—our prayer for healing—on Friday nights, I invite people to share the names of those for whom they are praying. This is one way we learn about our congregants' illnesses—their own or those of their friends and family. However, as I solicit names, I pass over people who choose to remain quiet. They choose not to share a name even though I know they are suffering—physically, emotionally, spiritually. Their pain is not public. Nevertheless, I pray for them, saying their names quietly to myself. Even though they remain quiet, simply being

in community with others, soothed by the liturgy, music and people who surround them, helps them to find their shelter from the storm. Often times our prayers brighten their days and give them hope. Our community provides comfort and strength for those whose wills are weakened.

Every Shabbat we gather in this sanctuary. Its theme, you might know, is nautical, evoking our connection to the sea and to the port. Have you ever thought of this sanctuary as an Ark, like Noah's? What do we do when we feel the world is falling down upon us? We find shelter; we draw nearer to one another. When our children are afraid, what do they do? They embrace us tightly, looking to us for assurance that everything is going to be all right.

When God told Noah of the plan to destroy the world, Noah built an Ark, to shelter him, his family, and two of every animal. The ark was their sanctuary. Through long and rainy nights and days, uncertain of where they would land, they became a community, dependent upon one another to ride out the storm.

Jonah, on the other hand, retreated from community, from responsibility. He tried to flee and endure his suffering alone. He was in the bowels of the ship as the stormy sea heaved it back and forth. Eventually, he was swallowed by the whale, and was alone in a dark, forbidding place.

On these High Holy Days, will you be like Jonah, fleeing alone or will you be like Noah, coming into the ark to form a sacred community? During these days, we rely on one another. We draw strength from one another.

All the more so on Shabbat. When a person who comes regularly is absent for a while, we're concerned. When she returns we welcome her with a warm embrace showing her that she was missed.

This feeling is magnified every month at our Healing Service. When we gathered three weeks ago, I remarked how good it was to be back. I hadn't been with this group for three months and I missed them. I felt empty. Very quickly, however, my emptiness was filled by the presence of a devoted community who come together each month to pray for themselves and others. A community that helps to heal their pain through their prayers and their presence. The healing service brings people together, into the ark, to be sheltered from the suffering that lurks outside in their uncertain world.

When we come into the sanctuary on Friday night, not only do we come into this ark, we also bring forth light. That's what Shabbat is about. Darkness descends on the day. We fill the darkness with the hopeful light of the Shabbat candles whose flames illumine our spirits. Outside of the ark, in the natural world, God brings forth light. Inside, that responsibility is ours. We strike the match. We light the flames of the Shabbat candles. They burn and glow casting light and hope throughout this space.

That, my friends, is an important lesson for this New Year. 5769 was a very dark year for many of us. Our physical and emotional pain was, at times, almost too great to bear. Many of us felt at times like Jonah in the belly of the whale. Now, darkness has fallen upon the year 5769. Last year is in the past. Tonight, we kindle light and bring forth

hope, as we begin 5770, a new year, with renewed purpose, renewed faith and renewed hope for all of this year's new possibilities.

I think of those who endured much last year, yet who also had reason to celebrate, whose year ahead, I pray, will be better than the last. I think of people going through difficult times, who have found a new home and new friends at Temple Beth El. Families who dealt with crises, yet still came together for *simchas*. Families struggling financially yet still able to provide their children with life transforming experiences. When one woman in particular learned of a potentially life threatening illness, she reached out to us for help. Throughout her ordeal she was never alone. We embraced her strongly, shared her pain, and supported her throughout her ordeal. And when the worst of it was behind her, we celebrated together, with tears of joy and gratitude.

Most often, our pain begins in solitude. We sit alone. We cry out for help. We then come into the Ark where we are consoled. And we emerge stronger, more secure, more hopeful. Hope endures when we come together into the Ark, and illumine it with our light.

A story is told of a nobleman in a European mountain village. This nobleman was concerned about the legacy he would leave to the people of his town. He spent a great deal of time contemplating his dilemma and, at last, decided to build the community a synagogue.

He determined that no one would see the plans for the building until it was completed. He spent many hours and a great sum of money working with contractors and builders to create the perfect structure.

At long last, the construction was finished. The townspeople were excited and curious about what they would find upon entering their new synagogue. Early one morning, they came into the building for the first time and marveled at the synagogue's magnificence. There were rooms of every shape and size, suitable for worship services, classes, meetings, parties, gatherings, and every other conceivable function. And no one could ever remember so beautiful a synagogue anywhere in the world!

Then, noticing a seemingly obvious flaw in the design, one of the townspeople asked, "Where are the lamps? What will provide the light?" Everyone looked around and, behold, nowhere in the entire building was a light or a lamp!

The proud nobleman pointed out brackets that were strategically placed all along the walls throughout the synagogue. He then gave each family a lamp as he explained, "Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp, and light it. When we are all here together, our synagogue will be illumined. But when you are not here, the lamp will remind you that some part of our building will be dark. I have built for you the structure, but you must bring the light. You must share your light with one another so we can all be a community together.

Friends, the year ahead may not be easy. Nevertheless, God willing, it will be better than last year. It will be much better when we come together to step into the Ark—when we bring our lamps and share our light with one another. When we realize that, yes, we're

all in the same boat. Hope and community will help us endure because we have faith in Solomon's wisdom: *Gam zeh ya'avor*. This too shall pass.

As we begin another year with new possibilities and renewed hope, let us drink deeply from the living waters of the *mikvah*. Let that water nourish our hope. Let us bring our lamps into the Ark, sharing the bright light of hope with one another.

This line of our morning prayer, *Yotzer Or*, to which I've added one word says it well: "*Or hadash al tziyon, v'aleinu ta'ir v'nizkeh kulano me'heirah l'oro*--Shine a new light upon us, upon Zion that we may swiftly merit its radiance." *Baruch Atah Adonai, Yotzer Ha'm'orot*. Blessed are you God, who creates light—of promise and of hope.

Amen

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Any similarities between my sermon and his are intentional.