

# THREE MODELS OF HOPE

## ROSH HASHANAH 5785

*Sermon: Day 2, by Rabbi Amy S. Walk*

This morning I want to talk about hope, and I have three models of hope I want to teach. The first is inspired by the teachings of the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In a Torah commentary on Parashat Bechukotai, Rabbi Sacks explores the following verse from Leviticus.

### **Text One: Leviticus 26:44-45**

Yet in spite of this when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away... I will for their sake remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I am the Lord.

In reading this verse, Rabbi Sacks is taken by the fact that God promises to remember the covenant. A reminder: This verse comes in a Torah portion in which Moses warned the Israelites that their well-being and happiness depended on their obeying the covenant and being faithful to the covenant. The curses are spelled out at length. The goal is to put fear into the hearts of the people. Rabbi Sacks knows that the more verses are dedicated to the Tokhehah and he reminds us of the promise made at the end of the verse — God will remember the covenant. This focus on remembrance is a theme of the High Holy Days — God remembers the covenant. Writing about this verse — I am sharing Rabbi Sacks' writing but that is for you to read at home. Rabbi Sacks is a clear writer and you can do this on your own. Let's go to Text Four.

### **Text Two: *The Birth of Hope*, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l, Bechukotai 5779**

Hope is one of the very greatest Jewish contributions to Western civilization, so much so that I have called Judaism "the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind."

In the ancient world, there were tragic cultures in which people believed that the gods were at best indifferent to our existence, at worst actively malevolent. The best humans can do is avoid their attention or appease their wrath. In the end, though it is all in vain. We are destined to see our dreams wrecked on the rocks of reality. The great tragedians were Greek. Judaism produced no Sophocles or Aeschylus, no Oedipus or Antigone. Biblical Hebrew did not even contain a word that meant 'tragedy' in the Greek sense. Modern Hebrew had to borrow the word: hence, tragedia.

Then there are secular cultures, like that of the contemporary West, in which the very existence of the universe, or human life and consciousness, is seen as the result of a series of meaningless accidents intended by no one and with no redeeming purpose. All we know for certain is that we are born, we live, we will die, and it will be as if we had never been....

Judaism is not without an expression of this mood. We find it in the opening chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes. For its author, time is cyclical. What has been, will be. History is a set of eternal recurrences. Nothing ever really changes:

...Ecclesiastes is the rare voice within the Bible. For the most part, the Hebrew Bible expresses a quite different view: that there can be change in the affairs of humankind. We are summoned to the long journey at whose end is redemption and the Messianic Age. Judaism is the principled rejection of tragedy in the name of hope.

... There is nothing inevitable or even rational about hope. It cannot be inferred from any facts about the past or the present. Those with a tragic sense of life hold that hope is an illusion, a childish fantasy, and that a mature response to our place in the universe is to accept its fundamental

meaninglessness and cultivate the stoic virtue of acceptance. Judaism insists otherwise: that the reality that underlies the universe is not deaf to our prayers, blind to our aspirations, indifferent to our existence. We are not wrong to strive to perfect the world, refusing to accept the inevitability of suffering and injustice.

### **Text Three: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l, From to Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility**

Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better, hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Hope requires far more courage than optimism.

The second model of hope that I want to talk about comes from Rabbi Yael Vurgan. This new Midrash was written by Rabbi Vurgan after October 7. Rabbi Vurgan is the rabbi for a community of kibbutzim in Israel that comprises Shaar HaNegev, all of which closely border Gaza. In the immediate aftermath of October 7, Rabbi Vurgan was on the phone all day with her congregants who were begging for help. She performed many impossibly painful funerals in the days that followed and she held so many communities that were just devastated by the violence and the horrific attacks. And yet she wrote a Midrash of hope.

### **Text Four: Rabbi Yael Vurgan, “One People to Another,” forthcoming in the second translated volume of *Dirshuni: Contemporary Women’s Midrash***

All my days, I grieved over this verse: ‘And God said to her, two nations are in your belly, and two peoples will go their separate ways from your bowels, and one people another will overpower, and the elder will serve the younger’ (Genesis 25:23).

And I asked: How did Rebekah hear that harsh prophecy while Isaiah heard, ‘no nation will take up a sword against another’ (Isaiah 2:4)?

She asks, how can it be that Rebekah heard a prophecy of two nations doomed to always be at war with one another, one nation overpowering the other, while Isaiah teaches of a time in which no nation will be at war and we will leave our swords behind?

In the Midrash, she then brings story after story of brothers between whom there was once enmity finding their way toward reconciliation: Isaac and Ishmael, Yaakov and Esav, Yosef and his brothers. Our Torah is filled with story after story of conflict between brothers and in story after story, eventually the brothers find their way back to one another. Until ultimately, we arrive at two brothers between whom there was no enmity, but only love: Moshe and Aharon.

And I heard most of the people and the leaders saying, ‘We will live by the sword forever.’

And I grieved and wept even more, that they prefer that bad prophecy that Rebekah heard over the good one.

Until a poem came into my hands:

‘I will believe in the future too, even if it is far off today, but it will come, they will come bearing peace, and then blessings, one people to another.’

Vurgan asks why is it that the people and the leaders seem to have only heard the first prophecy about Rebekah in which there will always be two nations at war, one overpowering the other? Why have they given up on Isaiah’s prophecy of peace? She grieves and longs for the prophecy of Isaiah in which no nation will lift up sword against nation. What about that prophecy? What about the world?

In the Midrash the narrator discovers a poem of 20th century Russian-born Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky, who writes of a future, far off from when he was writing, but a future nonetheless of peace. In his poem Tchernichovsky rejects this prophecy of dueling nations and embraces a future of nations at peace with one another. The language of the poem is powerful and resonant: even if it is far off today, still, there's a hope and a belief in this future world. Tchernichovsky believes in humanity's ability to rise to the occasion.

The Midrash concludes:

And I rejoiced a great joy that Tchernichovsky had come and turned the first prophecy upside down, and made it like the second, better one.

And I too, choose to believe in it, with all my heart and with all my might.

And I would go about in the city and call out, and shout, 'The two nations, can, they can live on this land in peace, share its blessings and be a blessing to one another!'

This feels like an impossible world to believe in right now. To call it 'far off' feels like an understatement. And yet, if Rabbi Vurgan can believe in this world, despite everything that she has seen since October 7 — in which she was called to bury friends and congregants she loved.

If Rabbi Vurgan can hold on to her hope, even though she has witnessed evil and seen communities shattered.

If Rabbi Vurgan can embrace hope — than you and I must do our best to follow her inspiring lead.

### **Text Five: Kibbutz Be'eri**

The last two examples of hope I want to offer come from the State of Israel.

Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the hardest hit locations on October 7th: 101 civilians murdered; 31 security forces murdered defending their home; 32 civilians taken hostage. The statistics alone are chilling on their own — imagine what they meant for this community of roughly 1,000 souls. In August, Mika and Elad Dubnov got married. They had a secular wedding on October 7th, 2022, and had anticipated an anniversary celebration on October 7th, 2023. Needless to say, that never

happened. Mika's aunt was murdered on the kibbutz and on October 8th, Elad was called into reserve duty. Over the course of the ensuing months, they decided on a religious ceremony to consecrate their marriage Jewishly: according to the laws of Moses and Israel as we proclaim in a Jewish wedding.



***Kibbutz Be'eri hosts wedding and homecoming, August 2024***



In August they were the first wedding in the kibbutz's synagogue since the horrors of October 7th. A wedding is the greatest symbol of Jewish hope. Why? Because it leads to children; because it embodies love, partnership, aspiration, commitment, a future; because it is the Jewish community in miniature when two families connect through two souls devoted to a life together.

### **Text Six:**

There is just one last example of hope I want to share with you. I ask you to look at the picture at the bottom of the page.

Smadar and Roe Idan ז"ל were murdered on October 7th in Kibbutz Kfar Azza. Their three children survived, but 3-year-old Avigail was taken hostage by Hamas.

At the end of November, Avigail was released as part of the hostage deal and was reunited with her siblings. After Avigail's release, Tair Mordoch, an Israeli entrepreneur, wrote to her:

*Hi Avigail,*

*We don't know each other, I am Tair, and in this picture is my beautiful extended family. The man at the center of the picture, Etzion, my dad, is like you, a child of a kibbutz; like you, orphaned from his father and mother from the age of 3.*

*My beloved father was born on the 5th of Iyar 1948. Eliezer ben Nevet, my grandfather, Palmach warrior, received the message on the birth of his son that night, while he was actively fighting to free Metsudat Koach. The fighters decided that it was too dangerous for Eliezer to go home and see his son, and they decided he would leave in the morning. During the night, a bomb hit the room of the fighters, and three soldiers were killed, Eliezer among them. Eliezer didn't get to see his only son. My father's mother, Deena, died three years later from cancer. My father was left an orphan. He was adopted by his aunt and uncle in the Kinneret Group and lived there all his life, to this day.*

*I want you to know that my father is the most optimistic and sweet and funny person that I know, and he's filled with happiness and love. Together with my mother, they created a big and beautiful family, 5 children and 13 grandchildren.*

*And we, davka, especially because of his life, are a special family, belonging here, to this*



*country, and this state. Connected to it and to each other.*

*Every year, on Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day), we go together with my father to his father's grave and then we go home to the Kinneret and celebrate my father's birthday. I always say that we are the story of this country.*

*I wish for you, Avigail, that you will be raised with love and that you will be safe, surrounded by family and good friends and your sweet and brave siblings.*

*And know that you have an entire loving people behind you.*

There is so much that is incredible in this letter. The fact that baby Eliezer grew up with a sweet disposition, the fact that he is the father of 5 children and 15 grandchildren, the fact that Tair Murdoch cared enough to write a letter of love and support to Avigail and her siblings. Now that is what hope is all about!

### **Conclusion: A poem by Adrienne Rich — Dreams Before Waking**

What would it mean to live  
in a city whose people were changing  
each other's despair into hope?—  
You yourself must change it. —

What would it feel like to know  
your country was changing?—  
You yourself must change it. —

Although your life felt arduous  
new and unmapped and strange  
What would it mean to stand on the first  
page of the end of despair?

This poem is a two-fold call to action. First, to imagine that another world is possible, a world of hope and not despair. And second, we are called on to be the people that create this world. Just as Rabbi Sacks teaches us — hope is courageous. Hope is hard work.

In the national anthem *Hatikvah* we say — we have not yet lost our hope — may each of us today find ways to live into hope for ourselves, our families, our people, and our country.