

Kol Nidre 2020/5781
Rabbi's Message
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Moving From Fear to Hope

On Erev Rosh Hashanah I talked about the fear we have been experiencing for the past six months. Fear is a very uncomfortable place to stay it, no matter how real it is, or how real it may seem. Tonight, I would like to talk about HOPE. How do we move from fear to hope?

Hope is the opposite of fear. Hope is the desire, expectation, and belief that something favorable will happen. It is a feeling of trust. Fear feeds anxiety and produces anger. Hope breeds optimism and feelings of well-being.

Judaism has always been a community that has found ways to remain hopeful despite the challenges we have faced throughout history. The national anthem of Israel is called HaTikvah – meaning, THE HOPE. “As long as within our hearts, the Jewish soul sings, our hope of two thousand years is not yet lost.” Judaism is still here and thriving because our people have ALWAYS found hope, even in the worst of situations.

So how do we, in this country, find a way to move from fear to hope? The historian, John Meacham, has a new book out called, “The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels, ” The introduction to the book is titled, To “Hope Rather Than to Fear.” He quotes Eleanor Roosevelt saying, “Surely, in the light of history, it is more intelligent to hope rather than to fear, to try rather than not to try.”

He further compares the differences between hope and fear:

Fear is about limits;

hope is about growth.

Fear casts its eyes warily, even shiftily, across the landscape;

hope looks forward, toward the horizon.

Fear points at others, assigning blame;

hope points ahead, working for a common good.

Fear pushes away;

hope pulls others closer.

Fear divides;

hope unifies.

Fear focuses on evil;

hope regards only the good.

This doesn't mean we ignore difficulties around us. John Meachem reminds us that being concerned is not the same thing as being fearful. He says fear is more emotional and destabilizing. It is still important to be concerned so we can take action as needed.

When we turn from fear to hope we realize that hope is sustaining. Having hope helps us to overcome our fears. Hope helps us realize the things we hope for can come to pass; without hope the things we fear can hold us back.

We are now in the midst of the holiest days of the year. We will be spending many hours together over the next 24 hours offering praying to God and reflecting on who we are and who we wish to be. To get the most out of Yom Kippur we HAVE TO believe in hope. Through the work of teshuvah, we hope and pray that we will be better, that life will be better, in the coming year. We wish each other a Shanah Tovah, a good year, rather than happy year. That phrase alone carries such hope. Yet, how can we pray when we have no hope?

In a recent article in the Forward, writer Shira Telushkin asked that very question. She wonders, “Is what we are praying for this year is that the new year **won’t get any worse?**” Not very hopeful or inspiring. Is there a way to find hope within ourselves that the next year WILL be better?

Shira refers to a Talmudic story: (Brachot 10b) Beloved King Hezekiah saw a vision that his children would be wicked so he decided not to get married, to prevent that from happening. One day he fell ill and the prophet Isaiah came to him. Isaiah accused Hezekiah of having no hope that his future children could be good people, and his illness was his punishment for denying that hope. So Hezekiah listened to what Isaiah told him and suggested that if he married Isaiah’s daughter there would be some hope, since she was a righteous woman. Isaiah refused, saying the decree was already declared by God. This frustrated the King. Having found hope he kicked Isaiah out of his house replying, “The tradition I have received from the house of my father’s father is that even if a sharp sword rests upon a person’s neck, he should not cease praying for mercy.” In other words, he have found a way to find hope and didn’t want that hope destroyed.

In our High Holy day liturgy we recite – *utfilah, utzedakah, uteshuvah* - “prayer, charity, and repentance” can reverse harsh decrees.

Let us use the powerful words of our liturgy as we go forward this evening and into tomorrow, to search our hearts, and pray with intensity to ask God to help us find the path from fear to hope.