

## Rosh Hashanah 5782

### *lo aleicha And Tikkun olam – On Cultivating The Attitude Of Hope.*

“The hand of God was upon me. God took me out by the spirit of God and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley and they were very dry.”

Ezekiel 37:11 “And God said to me, “O mortal, these bones are the entire House of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.’”<sup>i</sup>

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“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all –

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -<sup>ii</sup>

It *has* been a sore storm we lived through these past couple of years. hope has dwindled even for the most optimistic of us and is now a scarce resource. In a caricature circulating over the internet these days a stream of lemons are thrown at a person faster than they are able to make lemonade. This is our reality.

Even if we started out filled with motivation and commitment to *tikkun olam*, uncowed by the state of the world, one must admit that between the damages of the trump administration, the rise in antisemitism, the shocking revelations regarding police brutality, a never-ending pandemic, the escalating pace of natural disasters and other manifestations of the climate crisis, our resources are depleted, and we have more lemonade than we can ever drink.

I’d like to tackle today some of what I perceive as obstacles to continuing our social action work.

I’m doing it from a Jewish perspective because it is after all a Rosh Hashanah sermon, but everything I am saying has secular world parallels. And, yes, I am assuming we are all engaged in some form of *tikkun olam*, because I think we are, but also because it seems the consensus, that

being active for change is the best way to get through times of crisis. I encourage us all to get involved.

Number 1 which I call “I don’t feel like it” or “The lack of *kavanah*”.

*Kavanah* can be understood as spiritual focusing and intention - a state where our actions are accompanied by the right frame of mind and we are wholly present in the moment. Because our Judaism tends towards the Hassidic we have elevated *kavanah* as a value to aspire to. It may feel sometimes like having the right intention is more important than the act itself. But many Jewish thinkers claim that *kavanah* is not necessary. That a mitzvah that is done with no spiritual intention still has the same effect. Would it be nice to be happy? Sure. Is our ability to act in the world dependent on it? no, it’s not. As Rebecca Solnit says taking action is the best way to live in conditions of crisis and violation...and it is entirely compatible with grief and horror. You can” she says, “work to elect climate heroes while being sad.” We can be angry too. Or happy. Or tired and despondent and unfocused. The right mood it is not a requirement of social justice work. Don’t let sadness keep you from it.<sup>iii</sup>

Number 2 which I call “the future is dark” or “worst case scenario Judaism.”

When we are feeling the way we do these days it is easy to envision the future according to our worst case scenarios. And it is easy to then become convinced that these visions of the future are the only possible ones. But as Virginia Woolf said: “The future is dark, which is the best thing a future can be.” By dark, Woolf means unrevealed. Like the next act in a play. It can yet surprise us. Indeed, our grandmothers in the shtetl made expecting the worst into an art form (and often they were not wrong), but if you believe that the unknown has the potential to be so grim, you have to allow that it is possible that the future can also be positive. Don’t let your worst nightmares color your days. And remember that other’s predictions are also just that. Predictions. Not certainties.

Number 3, “its hopeless”

We have two narratives of the call to justice work and social action in Judaism. The first is *tikkun olam*, and the second, לא עליך המלאכה לגמור – it is not upon you to finish the work. We usually treat *tikkun olam*, that God placed us here to help fix and complete creation as our main narrative, and the second, which I will refer to as *lo aleicha*, as expounding on and asserting the

commitment to *tikkun olam*. But they are not two parts of the same thing. I believe we need to consider *lo aleicha* more seriously because it works better for right now than *tikkun olam*.

When we say *tikkun olam* we are using shorthand for a bundle of ideas. When we say we do *tikkun olam* we are hitching our wagons to this worldview:

The perfect God was on the path to create a perfect world when something went wrong. The vessels carrying the creative light of the divine fell into the chaos below and the process concluded without being completed. We were put here as helpers to God. Our role to find the places where there is imperfection, where the shards of holiness are buried in muck. What we call in human terms: injustice. And where we see injustice we recognize in it the potential for Good, we fix it and thus return a small broken piece of creation to God, removing one tiny hindrance to perfection. When that work of fixing injustice and returning all the broken shards to God is completed the world will be perfect as it was intended. We sometimes refer to this future point in time as the messianic age.

If you prefer this in secular language – I am saying *tikkun olam* is like what John Rawls calls ideal theory. It assumes we will be able to reach a state of justice in the world. Quote: “once the greatest forms of political injustice are eliminated, ... the great evils of human history – (unjust war and oppression religious persecution and the denial of liberty of conscience, starvation and poverty not to mention genocide and mass murder) ... will eventually disappear.”<sup>iv</sup> Rawls believed this is possible because Humanity is on an upward path of improvement and progress. As MLK said: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” There is an arc and its heading in a specific positive direction.

This form of thinking is appealing. It is goal oriented. Its goals are set clearly. There is a promise of reward at the end. A future sense of completion. And there is a nice tinge of moral superiority that goes with it.

The problem is that the motivation, the hope, comes from the promised end result. Remove the likelihood of that end result, say that we might never be able to reach a state of a just society, and it is very hard to remain excited about the project. Say that humanity might not even be progressing in a linear way towards justice and the whole project collapses. This is in part why

even though we are committed to *tikkun olam*, we lately find ourselves hopeless. Fighting to eliminate evil is depressing if we begin to doubt that evil can be eliminated. Climate action is harder when the news tells us that we are not going to succeed no matter what we do. (it doesn't actually say that). And when we think too closely about the fact that justice might not mean the same thing to all of us, that we have a very different idea of what constitutes a spark of holiness (see the latest Texas decision for example) we really want to hide under the bed.

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I am not a philosopher, and do not wish to, nor can I, replace our inhouse philosopher emeritus, but I've been reading this summer what various people think about our crisis of hope and I particularly liked what feminist philosopher Kathryn Norlock says in her article *Perpetual Struggle*: "we are better off with the heavy knowledge that evils recur than we are with idealizations of progress, perfection, and completeness." She proposes we move to a praxis centered ethic in which we adjust our expectations from changing an uncontrollable future to developing better skills for living in a world that exceeds our control. And she quotes Aldo Leopold who said "that the situation is hopeless should not prevent us from doing our best."

I think *lo aleicha* is a Jewish version of these ideas and can help us better to sustain and cultivate hope.

When we say: It is not upon you to complete the work, but nor are you at liberty to cease from it, we imply that the big project, The Work, is not something we are able to finish on our own, and likely, certainly, not something that can be completed in one's lifetime. But if we read carefully, it also does not say that the work can ever be completed. There is no guaranteed outcome. AND all the same we are not at liberty to cease. We cannot choose to not engage. (We cannot say, I am a perfectionist, and if I cannot see this project through, I am not sure I will feel committed to it. or: teamwork is not very fulfilling to me. Or I deserve an exemption because I am a control freak.)

There are two parts to this statement: "you won't finish it". and "you have to do it."

The rabbis wonder why we need the first part– it would have been sufficient to say "Just do it."

Some say: “it tells you in advance so you do not despair when you see you cannot complete the task”<sup>vi</sup>. Do not think that being able to finish is the point. And others add – “so you do not think that the reward depends on completion”<sup>vii</sup>.

Both explanations are in line with what Norlock calls cultivating an attitude of hope, and what Joanna Macy speaks of in her book *Active hope: How to face the mess we’re in without going crazy*.<sup>viii</sup>

“The word hope has two different meanings. The first involves hopefulness, believing our preferred positive outcome is likely to happen.” If we require this kind of hope before we commit ourselves to an action, our response gets blocked in areas where we don’t rate our chances too high.

The second meaning is about desire. It is this kind of hope that *starts* our journey — knowing what we hope for and what we’d like, or love, to take place. It is what we do with this hope that really makes the difference. Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for.”

Since Active Hope doesn’t require optimism, we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we choose what we aim to bring about. Rather than weighing our chances and proceeding only when we feel hopeful, we focus on our intention and let it be our guide.”

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So what is this intention that should guide us? Where do we find it?

I opened with Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Chassidic commentator the *Beis Ya’akov* explains that Ezekiel’s account can only be understood as an allegory. The “dead” are your dreams and hopes that have dried up inside you and that you think are lost. But nothing, he says, is lost. Do not despair. Even the driest bones, and the most dormant dreams, can be revived with inner introspection and reminding yourself that the spirit of God is within you.

And speaking of the spirit of God... I never really connected to Emily Dickinson's vision of hope as a chirpy little bird. Here's a Chassidic alternative from Rav Kook's *Orot hakodesh*, a book he wrote at a time of great despair, as the world was barely recovered from WWI and Nazism was already taking root in Europe.

He says: "Even when a person finds themselves drowning very deep in the muddy slime of life, they should know that a look inside will help them find their lost self and the light of their soul will be returned."<sup>ix</sup> Their *kavanah* – the spiritual intention.

And he shares these words of encouragement:

"Rise up, human, rise up. For you have mighty powers.  
you have wings of spirit, wings of noble eagles.  
do not deny them, call upon them, and they will appear immediately."<sup>x</sup>

The thing with feathers is in you. But it is not a little chirpy bird. Its wings are mighty and strong. It can withstand the current turmoil of the world. \*you\* can withstand the turmoil of the world. Just look inside. Find what it is that you would like to see happen in the world. Let this be your seed of new hope and cultivate it. Act out of this desire in your everyday life. And with time it will become a habit.

May your hope be renewed in this coming year. May the coming year be good for you and kind to you.

Shanah tovah.

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<sup>i</sup> Ezekiel 37:1-2

<sup>ii</sup> Emily Dickinson

<sup>iii</sup> Rebecca Solnit, [Don't despair: the climate fight is only over if you think it is](#), The Guardian Oct 14, 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> John Rawls, [The Law of Peoples](#). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999. 6-7.

<sup>v</sup> K. Norlock, [Perpetual Struggle](#), in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 34(2)

<sup>vi</sup> 2:16 תפארת ישראל על אבות

<sup>vii</sup> לא שכרך הקב"ה לגמור את כולה כדי שתפסיד שכרך אם לא תגמרנה – פירוש ברטנורא על פרקי אבות

<sup>viii</sup> Joanna Macy and Chris Johnston, [Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy](#), New World Library, 2012.

<sup>ix</sup> ראי"ה קוק, שמונה קבצים ד קג

אפילו כשימצא אדם את עצמו טבוע עמוק מאוד ברפש החיים ידע שההתבודדות הפנימית תמציא לו בחזרה את עצמיותו אשר אבד ואור נשמתו ישוב אליו.

<sup>x</sup> אורות הקודש א:ס"ד