

Hope is the Worm of the Human Spirit

Hope can be an incredibly powerful force. Hope is more than a motivational thought or a fading daydream—hope is a nothing-is-impossible-with-faith firestorm that refuses to be put out. It's an awareness that God is actually expecting, looking, and longing to show you everything that is good and possible. *Hope* is what stabilizes our frantic thoughts and emotions—it's an awareness that there is no problem too big.

These days, it's easy to be worn down by hopelessness. People lose hope when they experience overwhelming loss, repeated failures, impossible situations, or when they're hurt by people they trust. Like many of you, I understand what it's like to feel hopeless. Last year I sat next to my friend Margaux—who at 29 years old was diagnosed with breast cancer.

I prayed with her and her family—I cried repeatedly outside of Sloan Kettering every time I left her room because of how hopeless I felt. I bore witness to her pain, her anger, and her life. It was without a doubt the most difficult thing I have ever had to face in my life, because to feel hopeless is to be totally lost. Hopelessness can best be described as being on a boat without a compass, sailing across the ocean and hoping that the winds will guide you where you need to go.

Unfortunately, Margaux died nearly four years after she was first diagnosed. Last December before she spent her last time in the hospital, Margaux sat down to write what would ultimately be her eulogy. Though she knew her time was short, and though she was in tremendous pain, she never once let it show. And so, she said:

I want you all to know that it is so weird to have someone read a speech from a person who has passed away—but then I thought about it and felt like it would be my way of connecting with all of you here.

I love you all, you guys have given me strength, independence, support, self-confidence and motivation. You all have showed me what family means and I feel lucky and blessed to have all of you. When the pain was too much, and when I was

so sick from one more treatment, all of you gave me the hope and strength I needed to keep going. I never lost hope because of you—and though cancer will take my body, it will not take my spirit. I only hope now that it will mean something, that this pain will make a difference, that I am here for a bigger purpose.

When Margaux sent these words for me to read at her funeral, I realized that though we all sometimes do feel hopeless, she never lost hope. She, somehow, found the strength to remain positive in the face of the greatest challenge anyone could ever face. Instead of saying to herself, “If I don’t expect anything good to happen, I won’t be disappointed when it doesn’t,” she chose to believe that something good can and will happen. Ultimately hope didn’t change her diagnosis, but it did affect how she was going to live with it.

Hope is a positive expectation that something good is going to happen to you. Hope is not a wishy-washy, vague, wait-and-see attitude, but an action we must choose to take on purpose each day. Hope and faith go hand in hand. Hope can allow us to endure hardships and long waiting periods¹. In Psalm 27 we read “אֵל-יְהוָה: קְוֵה, אֵל-יְהוָה: תִּזְק, וְיִצְמַח לְבָבִי; וְקְוֵה, אֵל-יְהוָה²—Hope for the Eternal; be brave and courageous and let your heart be hopeful for God.” Hope dares us to believe! It says to us, “You know what? Things might just work out after all.”

This is perhaps best illustrated in the work of Victor Frankl who in 1946 published *Man’s Search for Meaning*: chronicling his experiences as a prisoner in concentration camps during World War II. According to Frankl, the way a prisoner hoped for the future affected his or her longevity. Reflecting upon his time as a prisoner, Frankl noticed something unusual—the people who survived were not always the ones you’d expect.

Many who were physically strong wasted away and died while others who were much weaker physically grew strong and survived. Why? What was it that enabled them to hang on through a living hell? Frankl believed that the difference between those who survived and those who perished was—simply—hope.

¹ Discover the Power Of Hope: Everyday Answers
Joyce Meyer—<https://joycemeyer.org/everydayanswers/ea-teachings/discover-the-power-of-hope>

² Psalm 27:14

Those who survived never gave up their belief that their lives had meaning, that despite everything going on around them—it would one day end and they would live meaningful, purposeful lives. What is the basic human drive? The one thing that gives life value? The ability to live with a sense of hope and possibility. Not pleasure. Not power. But personal meaning.

Frankl writes: “What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.”³ For some of us that meaning could be our family or our friends. For others it could be the thrill and challenge of work or the opportunity for joy and happiness. But what is clear in Frankl’s approach is that hope and purpose have a powerful and positive influence on people’s lives.

Now I’m not trying to stand up here to suggest that those who survived the Holocaust all had one thing in common—holding on to hope. Some believed it was definitely an amount of luck or chance that got them through. For others divine intervention was involved. However, I do believe that the power of positive thinking and believing that things will get better—of holding on to the possibility of what will be—or what could be—can inspire even the weakest among us to live one more day.

When one actually stops and considers the concept of “hope” it is both incredibly simple and incredibly complex. It is not something that you can measure, and there is not much in the way of understanding why one person is more hopeful than another. Our Rabbis had a very unique way of looking at it. In Pirkei Avot we learn that Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh said that we must be exceedingly humble, for the hope of man is like worms: *Sh’tikvat Enosh Rimah*.

At its essence the worm is a simple creature. It has the ability to regenerate. It lives in the ground and, other than the occasional rainy day or fishing pier, rarely makes its presence known to the world. And yet, without these simple and mundane creatures, the world's ecosystem would not function. Worms help to increase the amount of air and water that gets into the soil. They break down organic matter, like leaves and grass, into things that plants can use. When they eat, they leave behind castings that are a very valuable type of fertilizer. Worms are like free farm help. They turn the soil over and over, hiding underneath the surface in plain sight.

³ Frankl, Viktor E. 1984. *Man’s Search for Meaning: an Introduction to Logotherapy*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Pg. 166

Hope is the worm of the human spirit. It sits beneath the surface, turning itself within each of us, aerating the spirit, lifting us up and moving us to a place of function and possibility. In the history of the Jewish people, hope lived just beneath the surface for thousands of years—and all it needed to bloom was just a bit of water and a bit of fertilization of inspiration.

As a people we are well acquainted with long waiting periods and hardships—for two thousand years we hoped and prayed to be back in the land of Israel. The hope for the redemption of the Jewish people—the end of exile and the return to the Land of Israel—is a central component of Jewish religious belief. The transformation of this religious belief into a political ideology at the end of the 19th century led to the creation of the Zionist movement. For thousands of years our people dreamed of an existence and life in Israel. We dreamed of coming home—back to the land of our mothers and our fathers, and the land of David. *Libiyot am chofshi—b'artzeinu*—to be a free people in our own land—free to do what we want—free to live our lives as Jews. Free to choose for ourselves how we wish to live, to rule, to vote, and to exist.

In 1896, Theodore Herzl published his vision for the Jewish State in his publication *Der Judenstaat*. He writes:

The idea I have developed in this pamphlet is an ancient one: It is the restoration of the Jewish State...The plan would seem mad enough if a single individual were to undertake it; but if many Jews simultaneously agree on it, it is entirely reasonable, and its achievement presents no difficulties worth mentioning. The idea depends only on the number of its adherents. Perhaps our ambitious young people, to whom every road of advancement is now closed, and for whom the Jewish state throws open a bright prospect of freedom, happiness, and honor—perhaps they will see to it that this idea is spread...It depends on the Jewish people themselves whether this political document remains for the present a political romance.⁴

In so many ways Herzl's dream from the 19th century still exists and is alive today. The people of Israel are still trying to live autonomous lives, they are still trying to build something beautiful and flourishing in the desert; the dream that we would have a Jewish state alive and thriving is still a dream. Yet the miracle of the Jewish people in the twentieth century and the reality that the State of

⁴ [*Der Judenstaat*](#). Retrieved October 8, 2019

Israel exists today is not only about hope of a generation—it is also about action and real work. Hope without action is just a dream—but when we put that hope to good use, when we let it stir the soil and the soul, it can become something greater—something that we can feel and touch—it is how we turn our dreams into reality.

When I was in Israel this past summer with many members of our community, I spent quite a bit of time thinking about *Ha-Tikvah*—the Israeli national anthem, which literally translates to “The Hope”. But what does that mean? It is more than just a longing and belief that one day we will come back to the birthplace of our people. Although that is certainly one piece of it—there is more. The Hope of yesterday has become more than just a longing—the Hope of today is a reality or at least an ideal—a purpose that we can work towards.

Signed and written in 1947, the Israeli Declaration of Independence lays out explicitly what has been fought for and what we continue to struggle for:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.⁵

The dream and the hope of our people for thousands of years as outlined by Theodore Herzl would remain such until reality struck. We as a people in the mid-twentieth century needed to find, as Victor Frankl said, meaning or purpose. Those who survived the Holocaust needed to find a way to move on—to continue to live—to survive. They even acknowledged this in the Declaration—

The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people—the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe—was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, which

⁵ [*Declaration of Independence from the State of Israel*](#). (Retrieved October 8, 2019)

would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the community of nations.

That was the purpose and the meaning that our people needed to continue—that we needed to survive. And today, though the hope remains that our people will continue to live and govern ourselves, at its core, the ideals and ideas of Israel remain as a place where all of us can find our place. Is that not one of the reasons why we are all here today? Hope is one part of the High Holidays—it's not only about a dream—it's also about action. Hoping that something works out is suggesting that you have no control over it, as if it's totally up to luck or chance.

Judaism has an antidote, and a strategy for how we can change, for how we can make this moment not be about hoping that we will be better this year, but that we will actually do better. The Torah teaches us that it is never too late to change. Changing for the better is called doing *teshuvah*. The Hebrew word *teshuvah*, which is often translated as “repentance”, actually means to “return.” Return to God. Return to our self. It's true, we all have faults. We all make mistakes that cause us to suffer in some way or another. I know in my life I have inadvertently hurt people; I have disappointed, I know I could always be better. And I realize life has its ups and downs—it's just the way the world operates—we all know some days we are good and some days we were bad—well not bad exactly, maybe just “less good”. But I think that what matters, and what's important is that we don't focus on what we wish we could have done, or what we wish we could or should do. Judaism actually gives us the skills and pathway to change.

I know that there are sometimes things that are out of our control, and no matter how much we hope they will get better or change, we can't do anything about it. But those things that we can control, those actions and decisions we can make that are under our control—they are powerful. First, we must find a way to recognize that we have made a mistake—or *hakarot ha-chet*. It's about finding why we did what we did. Then we must regret what we have done. Regret, as opposed to guilt, is that state of agitation in which one feels a sense of loss.

We must do what is known as *aziva*—or “stopping the action—to no longer do what is harmful.” This is about breaking the cycle of sin or hurt. After we have recognized our mistake, and felt that sense of regret, when we come face-to-face with it again—we stop. And finally, we must actually do confession or *vidui*. In other words, “Now go and say you're sorry.” Because when you verbalize

your regret it finalizes everything. There is no escape. The truth about our actions and their consequences are laid bare for all to see when you utter those simple words: “I’m sorry. I feel awful about what I did, it won’t happen again. I promise.”

Rabbi Levine often talks about the power of this day, and the power of the moments when we stand together as a community, of individuals praying to God, asking for forgiveness. When we stand confessing to each other and ourselves what it is that we actually did wrong, we are praying that we can move God from the God of Judgement to the God of Mercy, from the God that can take a life to a God that will keep it. When we do this completely, the Rabbis talk of an image when God descends wrapped in a tallis from the heavens as the gates are closing during Neilah to pardon us with the words, “*salachti kidvarecha*”—I have forgiven you. It is a powerful image, a really moving idea that God can and will be moved and can and will forgive—but only when we confess and acknowledge that we have done wrong.

Look—I want to acknowledge and accept that this is hard. *Teshuvah* is not easy—it’s not a straight path. There are very few straight paths in life, and this no different. I know that I get in the way of myself all the time. I definitely fall victim to denial that I did anything wrong, or rationalization—maybe even forgiving myself too much. It’s hard stuff—and it’s supposed to be because if it was easy it wouldn’t have much meaning. And there can be great meaning in the struggle and challenge of *teshuvah*.

We can learn a lot about ourselves, and even repair lost relationships or damaged egos. Perhaps this is the year or the season when we finally stop hoping that we will be better, and start actually being better. Back in the hospital room with my friend Margaux it was just the two of us. While these moments were few and far between with doctors and nurses and friends running in and out—this moment is one that I will never forget. When I asked Margaux, “How did you find the strength to keep going through all of these tests, steps forward, steps backwards—all of the challenges?” She looked at me with tired eyes—eyes that once were the bluest eyes I had ever seen—and said,

You know, I thought about giving up so many times. From the first moment I was diagnosed to when it progressed to the point where it is now. But I had and have believed that this diagnosis this disease this reality that I am in has to mean something. It has to become something—there has to be some good out of this. So,

I decided to not let cancer define me, but instead to find a purpose and meaning in what I'm facing. I found meaning in my friends and family, I joined up with organizations, I raised money to fight cancer. If I didn't live a life meaning, even when I was dying, then it would all have been for nothing. So, I found hope and joy and possibility in the darkness—I found my purpose in life—even if it is in my inevitable death.

And I pray, that all of us, this year—will too. Shanah Tovah.