

Planting Hope: Fortifying Our Present with a Future that Blooms

We had everything we needed. We were gathered in person, we had a tribe and a shared goal, and a single mood of energized anticipation saturated us with confidence.¹ In the early weeks of June, despite all odds, our Knicks dribbled toward destiny, and nothing could hamper the hope-filled momentum fueling New York City.

In all five games of the NBA finals, the Knicks were down in the first quarter, often more than 10 points, yet our confidence never wavered. Squeezed atop scaffolding and school buses, scrambling up street signs, spilling over sidewalks, we surged with seeming inevitability toward the title. How do we copy and paste that experience of triumphant expectancy onto the rest of our lives?

So many of us feel like we're down 10 points. Maybe more. It's not just that we feel we're losing; the referees are biased, the play-by-play announcers can only see half the court; even the commentators are rooting against us. Some of us have lost jobs and/or friendships. People we cherish have died or become ill this year. Bigotry parades as righteousness, fanaticism corrodes politics, mistrust grows between neighbors and allies, and it is difficult to metabolize our anger. We experience profound loneliness, we feel misunderstood - I feel misunderstood. Many of the groups who embraced me as a liberal Zionist call me "abominable" now. I grieve that my children won't grow up assuming, like I did, that anti-Semitism expired in the mid-20th century.

The cycle now beleaguering us, if not already familiar, was known by generations of our ancestors. We arrive in a new place, we work to survive, some of us thrive, and then instability spawns fear and thirsts for a scapegoat. Jews are blamed and bullied, our pain and our differences are weaponized, and the safety so many of us once felt in our city and even in our skin is no longer guaranteed.

And yet, in the first weeks of June when New York was bathed in blue and orange, this recognizable swell of disquiet subsided for a bit. We were not Zionists and anti-Zionists, Democrats and Republicans, oppressors and oppressed - we were Knicks fans. People of every identity and ideology were rooting for a win that would belong to all of us. We shared a dream.

In a universe inclined toward entropy, and in a political era that thrives on fear, hope is our citadel. History unfolds without prioritizing our equanimity. The work of finding balance and

¹ Lauren Jackson, "[Believing: Knicks fans saw God](#)," *The New York Times*, 14 June 2026 [accessed 15 June 2026].

uplift and meaning is ours. Our Yom Kippur Torah reading distills this: “See, I set before you this day life and goodness, death and adversity... וּבְחַרְתָּ בְּחַיִּים Choose life—if you and your descendants would live.”² It’s a choice. How do we fashion lives that accentuate our agency, that bring hope within our grasp, not once every 53 years, but every day?

The Talmud tells a story of a miracle-worker named Honi who meets a stranger planting a carob tree. Honi asks them, “How long will it take this tree to bear fruit?” When they reply, “Seventy years,” Honi probes, “Do you really think you’re going to live seventy years?” אָנָּה הָרוּבָא בְּעָלְמָא “I found a world full of carob trees,” the planter answers in Aramaic. “Just as my ancestors planted for me, so too will I plant for my descendants.”³ The story continues that Honi falls asleep for seventy years and awakens to see a man gathering fruit from the tree. When Honi interrogates the man, he responds, “I am the grandchild of the one who planted it.”

We can all embrace the explicit message of this story: sowing for our future heightens our awareness of our own unearned bounty - the nourishment we enjoy that we did not cultivate. The planter pays forward the blessings they reaped without request. This character’s choice becomes all the more poignant when we consider the context in which the story appears: Honi encounters the planter while wrestling with a verse from Psalms which reads, “When Adonai brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream.”⁴ Those “returning to Zion” refers to the first Israelite exile in Babylonia, a catastrophic rupture in the unfolding Jewish story, which lasted seventy years. How, Honi wonders, could anyone dream for seventy years?!

Our planter embodies two powerful responses to Honi’s query. First, whether our experience of exile is literal or metaphoric, we can confront our own uprootedness by planting new roots, by owning our ability to put gifts in the soil and water them. We can build a home wherever we land and prepare the ground for those who come after us. Second, we can take that long view. We can imagine beyond our own era and its tumult to a future that blooms with more shade and fruit for our descendants. We can fashion a world full of carob trees even if we won’t be here to witness them flower.

The Honi story is a summons to act amidst the strains of exile. “Don’t hoard your hope!”, the planter teaches Honi. Think beyond yourself. The dream of returning to Zion is about nurturing a hope that outlasts us. The carob tree that blooms three generations later doesn’t emerge out of thin air. In the words of Langston Hughes:

And so the root
Becomes a trunk
And then a tree
And seeds of trees

² Deuteronomy 30:15-19

³ Talmud Bavli Taanit 23a

⁴ Psalms 126:1

And springtime sap
And summer shade
And autumn leaves
And shape of poems
And dreams—
And more than tree.⁵

Seeds of hope require time and water. To plant hope then is a covenantal act that imagines us completing our task and trusting that God or to whomever we entrust our faith will reciprocate. Such trust takes patience and tenacity. Sometimes 53 years' worth. The choice to plant affirms we are neither alone nor abandoned.

Hope, like trees, is not some pollyannish luxury. We need it to breathe. Hope is not naive optimism in the face of threat and turmoil, it is a bulwark for the soul and a portable strategy for resilience.

In the Warsaw Ghetto, Emmanuel Ringelblum, a Polish Jewish historian and social worker, coordinated an operation called *Oyneg Shabbes*.⁶ Realizing the significance of his community's incarceration and suffering, he led a cadre of young activists to gather documentation.⁷ Over three years, they collected nearly 35,000 artifacts, including testimonies, diaries, letters, underground newspapers, artwork, ration cards, children's writings, and cultural ephemera. These materials form the most comprehensive contemporaneous Jewish record of life in the Warsaw Ghetto.⁸ What began as a scholar's efforts to preserve history, evolved into a defiant project to safeguard proof of German atrocities.

The holdings of the *Oyneg Shabbes* archives were buried in three parts. On August 3, 1942, teacher Israel Lichtensztajn and two students buried 10 tin boxes in a bunker beneath their former public school at 68 Nowolipki Street. In February 1943, Ringelblum and Lichtensztajn placed two large milk cans beneath the same building. On April 18, 1943, one day before the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the third part was placed in a cylindrical metal box beneath 34 Swietojska Street.⁹

After the Shoah, the seeds of the *Oyneg Shabbes* archives bloomed. Three survivors who participated in Ringelblum's project—Rokhl Oyerbakh, Hersh and Bluma Wasser—were able to lead Polish scholars to two of the three burial sites. While the third was never found, what they

⁵ Langston Hughes, "For Russell and Rowena Jelliffe," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, Ed., (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 540.

⁶ Jacob Flaws, "[Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabbes Archive](#)," *The National World War II Museum New Orleans*, 21 May 2025 [accessed 6 July 2026].

⁷ The Archivists, "[The Oyneg Shabbat Archive](#)" *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* [accessed 6 July 2026].

⁸ "[Will These Words Reach You? The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto](#)," *The Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust* [accessed 8 July 2026].

⁹ Ibid.

did unearth now informs collections, research, and scholarship at the heart of institutions ranging from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, from YIVO in New York to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, and beyond.

The Oyneg Shabbes collective were planters of another kind. While the character in Talmud lived amidst abundance, the Polish activists' inheritance had been violently deracinated by the Nazis and their collaborators. Those impounded in the Warsaw Ghetto experienced a deeper exile even than their Israelite ancestors in Babylonia. Expelled from civilization, they planted their humanity in the blood-soaked earth. What they put in the ground testified to their identities, to their resilience and their endurance, and to the sustained assault on every facet of their beings. They refused to be erased from history. And that refusal was a choice made in hope. Not a naive hope that they would be rescued or even that they would survive, but a solemn hope that what they buried would be uncovered. And it was.

God issues the very first commandment to humanity in the Garden of Eden: פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבָּשֶׁהָ, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue her.”¹⁰ The earth is not inert, it is alive and unpredictable. And how does God imagine humans establishing symbiosis with their untamed domain? By flowering, and multiplying, and filling her with life.

It's easy to read “subdue” with the eye of a cynic who assumes the earth is ours to exploit and master. But that's not at all God's instruction. The verb כָּבַשׁ carries the valence of “make this land yours, build a home here.” God blesses humanity with the earth and gives us seeds and trees for nourishment.¹¹ There is no conflict in Eden. Earth in the creation story is meant to be a repository for our dreams. Planting new life is our very first covenantal obligation.

We have long since left Eden, but the commandment of Genesis still stands. *Pru urvu* - fill this world with life. Back in June, as New York City throbbed with Knicks fervor, millions of us were able to put our politics and problems aside. Columnist and superfan Matt Flegenheimer described the impossible joy of our streets:

It is giggling, weeping, spinning, convulsing, mosh-pitting, truck-honking... trumpet-playing, cowbell-ringing, off-key-singing, cigar-lighting, all-night-ing — remembering to remember it all...¹²

¹⁰ Genesis 1:28

¹¹ Ibid 1:28-9

¹² Matt Flegenheimer, “[Knicks Give Their City Something New: Impossible Joy](#),” *The New York Times*, 14 June 2026 [accessed 15 June 2026].

The pervasive climate of jubilation that engulfed our stubborn, never-give-up metropolis was built on countless individual choices to center team spirit and to participate in Knicks fandom as members of community. *Pru urvu u'milu*- we bloomed, we multiplied, and we filled the streets. This is what planting hope looks like, and we did it on concrete.

In wondering how a person can dream for 70 years, Honi identifies hope as a muscle that can tire and atrophy. How does hope endure? We must flex in exile and under duress, and remember to condition even amidst the peace of a shady, fruit-filled grove.

Rodeph Sholom is a veritable grove of goodness. Did you know that all year long, congregants call us to remove loved ones from the Mi Shebeirach list because they enter remission from cancer or heal from another illness? Did you know that CRS has more members than ever before in our 184 years, more than 1950 families, and that since its founding three years ago, the Israeli Hug Center has served 3,500 Israelis in New York City? Did you know that since last Rosh Hashana hundreds of our students, campers, and adult volunteers filled and distributed 6,100 Backpacks with 92,000 pounds of nutritious food to local schoolchildren?

And bounty burgeons beyond our building! Seedlings of invention cascade across so many facets of the world: in the last two years an iPad has been invented for Blind users, doctors began experiments with a dissolvable pacemaker for newborn babies that's smaller than a grain of rice, and a French biotech firm opened the first commercial plant that manufactures packaging and textiles fashioned from tens of thousands of tons of garbage!¹³

Though we feel setbacks in our day to day related to war, politics, and legislation, if we broaden our timeline, we even see uplifting global trends. From massive strides in literacy among children and adults¹⁴ to a significant decline in drug overdoses¹⁵ to pronounced reduction in childhood mortality - fewer than half as many children died in 2025 as in the year 2000¹⁶ - seeds of healing and empowerment are taking root. In a quotidian mindset, we can feel deluged by toxic leadership and the antagonisms they exacerbate, but taking the 70-year-view like the planter enables us to detect encouraging progress.

¹³ Chris Stokel-Walker, Allana Akhtar, Marina Koren, "[Best Inventions of 2025](#)" *Time Magazine*, 9 Oct 2025 [accessed 15 July 2026].

¹⁴ "[International Literacy Day 2025 Fact Sheet](#)" UNESCO, September 2025 [accessed 16 July 2026].

¹⁵ "[U.S. Overdose Deaths Decrease for Third Consecutive Year in 2025](#)," National Center for Health Statistics, 13 May 2026 [accessed 16 July 2026].

¹⁶ "[Under-five mortality](#)," UNICEF, March 2026 [accessed 16 July 2026].

The High Holy Days are an invitation to inculcate Honi's exercise. How do we flex our hope? Are we sowing alone or with a team? Which trees flower with joy and meaning? How many of their seeds must we plant to shape a future that blooms with their ripe fruit 70 years from now?

Amidst all we're carrying as Am Yisrael at the dawn of 5787, my hope remains unscathed. When the words of the *Shema* bring tranquility to my grandchildren before they drift off to sleep, my hope will bloom. When they sing *Hatikvah* and shoulder the weight of Jewish sovereignty, my hope will bloom. When future generations find depth and blessing and challenge as they seek to braid their Judaism with threads of other vibrant identities, seeds we plant together will bloom. When our descendants enjoy flowers and fruits, love and curiosity, passion, innovation, and relationship, our hope blossoms. And new hopes beyond my imagination, like penicillin and airplanes, once visionary and now ordinary, that protect and propel us forward, will bloom because we will plant them. This is what my hope looks like, and I plant it with you here now.

Our past knows blessing and pain; our present feels vulnerable, but our future is where countless seeds we sow will flower, where many of the artifacts we bury will be uncovered. We have agency here. What will we plant?

Pru urvu u'milu - fill the earth with blossoming, pulsing, multiplying hope. *Uvcharta b'chayim* - and plant a future that brims with life.