

## The Anatomy of Hope<sup>1</sup>

Their eyes still haunt me.

This past December, as I stood before the students and faculty of a local high school, I kept returning to everyone's eyes. The administration invited me to raise a Jewish lens into the school to process this time of fracture. The beleaguered leadership hoped my visit might offer a path of possibility, to return the school community to a place of civility and unity. In everyone's eyes, before I even uttered a word, I could see I was doomed to fail. Some eyes shone with hope – eyes of students who knew me, eyes of faculty who believed I represented what had been the missing perspective in the wake of massacre and war. Some eyes blazed with fury – those for whom I represented evil and inhumanity. But most of the school refused to meet my eyes. Some simply closed them, others seemed fascinated by the weave of the carpeting. But most seemed to be sitting in exhaustion and despair. Their eyes said it all. In that moment I knew I had stepped into a space of shattered spirits.

From last Rosh Hashanah to this one, lives, hearts, families, communities were torn apart. For many of us, it feels like a different world. Antisemitism now rests comfortably in hearts of every sector of society. Israel, once a unifier of American Judaism, now represents rupture in even the most Jewish of spaces. Praying for hostages is seen as moral manipulation. Praying for the safety of civilians is seen as political propaganda. Praying for peace is seen as complacency. Within our own congregation we experienced it all. Felt it all. Fear. Rage. Grief. Betrayal. Shame. But like the eyes of that school community, what terrified me most this year was the despair.

Every year on Rosh Hashanah, we read two stories of fractured family. Today we encounter the story of Abraham and Isaac climbing up Mt. Moriah together. Following God's command, Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son. At the climax of the narrative, knife in hand ready to deliver the sacrificial blow, Abraham hears the voice of an angel. And the angel tells him to stay his hand. *Vayisa Avraham et-einav* - and Abraham lifted up his eyes.<sup>2</sup> And in so doing, Abraham sees a ram caught in a nearby thicket, and discovers he can sacrifice something other than his own son.

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<sup>1</sup> With eponymous attribution to the work of Dr. Jerome Groopman. His work helping care for Esther Weinberg, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, sparked his curiosity about how his mentor managed to spark enough hope for her to seek chemotherapy in the face of her theological belief she deserved to suffer.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 22:13

The second story is about Hagar, the Egyptian concubine of Abraham, which we will read tomorrow. Banished to the desert with her young son, Ishmael, Hagar wanders until her food and water run out, then lays her child under a bush and turns away, because she cannot bear to watch him die. She cries out in despair. And Hagar then hears the voice of an angel. *Vayifkach Elohim et-einehah* - then God opened her eyes. And at that instant she discovers a well of water in the wilderness and Ishmael is saved. She calls that place the *Be'er-lahai-roi* ("the Well of the Living One who sees me.").<sup>3</sup>

Abraham casts out one son to die in the desert out of fealty to his wife, and prepares to slaughter his other son out of zealous obedience to God. The Abraham willing to defy and challenge God to save the lives of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Abraham willing to bring strangers of the desert into his own tent, seems blind to the possibilities right in front of him. Where is the priority of collective wellbeing? The contemplation of future generations? The ripple effects of his faithful righteousness? He never speaks to either of his sons again, and soon after these events, Sarah dies. Abraham is left alone in the ruins of a future from which he severed himself.

But there is a subtle linkage between these two tales that casts both stories in a different light. After surviving his near-sacrifice, Isaac leaves his father forever. He goes searching instead for the start of a new family. We read in the Torah, "Isaac returned from the area of Be'er-lahai-roi – "from the Well of the Living One who sees me."<sup>4</sup> That is, after his own trauma, Isaac goes looking for Hagar and his half-brother Ishmael, back to the very place where she found hope and possibility. This is astounding. Why would Isaac, alone and shaken, seek out forgotten family he never knew? And why would Hagar and Ishmael, who were exiled because of Isaac's existence, allow such a visit?

Perhaps Isaac, now shaken, holds newfound compassion for Hagar and Ishmael, and comes to offer care and receive consolation in return. Perhaps he knows of the terror experienced by his exiled family, and their miraculous ability to shape a bright future nonetheless, and wishes to glean their wisdom. Even more radical, our early sages imagine that Isaac seeks out Hagar and Ishmael to bring them back to Abraham.<sup>5</sup> From his own shattered security, Isaac steps into the brokenness of his family and imagines a different way. He returns to the place where Hagar's eyes were opened before, and together, imagine a future beyond the fracture.

Poetically, the next line of the Torah shows the power of such an act. After returning from Be'er-lahai-roi, "Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Lifting her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac."<sup>6</sup> Out of two tales of trauma, this repeated theme of raising eyes, of lifting gaze, is the sign of possibility. This becomes the

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 16:14

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 24:62

<sup>5</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 60:14; it only mentions Hagar. Though since Isaac and Ishmael reunite to bury their father in Genesis 25:9, some surmise this juncture was what opened the familial healing to enable connection in grief.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 24:63-64

Torah's anatomy of hope: to lift our gaze, we imagine our possible future, and choose a better way towards it.

Our Rosh Hashanah readings then are stories of hope out of despair. Stories of hearing the divine voice and seeing beyond the inevitable present. From fracture, creating a new future. These are the stories of Rosh Hashanah for they remind us that in reconsidering where we cast our gaze, we may discover a new path of possibility.

As I stood in front of the students and faculty, I tried an exercise. "Raise your hand if you are terrified of what I might say here today." A number of hands shot up. "Raise your hand if you wished you'd brought popcorn and can't wait to see how everyone is going to react to a rabbi talking in your school." More hands raised. "Raise your hand if you're scared at the state of the world." Many hands raised. "Raise your hand if you're angry about something you see taking place right now." Nearly every hand raised. "Raise your hand if you have hope." Only a few hands remained raised. Galvanized by that collective display, a voice called out from the crowd, "What's the point of hoping? It's not like it does anything."

And in that moment, that voice, that student, offered an opening.

In 2015, the small town of Yahaba, Japan faced a crisis. Years of water shortage created desperation, and the citizens were passionately divided about the best way forward. The arguments, debates, and castigations failed to unify the town nor forge a path forward. At a town hall meeting, they decided to try something new – they divided the townspeople into two groups, one to represent the interests and opinions of today, and the other to role play the future citizens of Yahaba living in the year 2060. The result was fascinating. The Yahabans found that what felt moral and responsible in the present was not necessarily what is moral and responsible through the lens of 2060. As the collective were invited to lift their eyes and think about a shared horizon, they noticed a changed capacity to explore present possibilities. The result unified the town and many volunteered to help create some of these distant goals. Every year since, the annual town hall meetings invite everyone to make choices in light of a shared future. The practice, now called Future Design, has been shown to increase empathy, creativity, and is one of the most effective tools to get a divided group to dedicate their energies towards building a better future together. It is so successful, in fact, that it is already being used by countries and companies around the world.<sup>7</sup>

I opted to offer the school community a variation of this exercise. I asked the students to imagine the world of their grandchildren. We pour so much of our energy into this moment,

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<sup>7</sup> Suzette Brooks Masters and Karthick Ramakrishnan, "The Promise of Future Design," School of International Futures, 2024. [https://soif.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/05/Future-Design\\_FINAL\\_v11.pdf](https://soif.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/05/Future-Design_FINAL_v11.pdf); special thanks to our CRS member Suzette Brooks Masters for her leadership and support and elevating these ideas to me and to so many others. William Macaskill's "What We Owe The Future" is a superb exploration of what he calls "longtermism" – the choice to look farther into the future and make choices towards desired horizon points. For a more accessible read, Ari Wallach's "Longpath" explores the same concept.

believing that we know absolutely who is the villain and who the victim, what is the path of morality and what of immortality. But in the myopia of the moment, our gaze set two inches in front of us, we fail to notice how little is indeed set, how often the wolf and the sheep may wear one another's clothes, how entwined are trauma and triumph, and how rarely will the volume of our voice actually change the hearts of our opponents. When we lift our eyes, however, when we imagine the long possibilities before us, we can see how many different paths may lead us towards the desired horizon point. Even more, we may find that across differing identities and ideologies, many of us yearn for the same distant future. And in realizing this, we may also see that even in the fracture of this moment, there is a shared future that calls to us with responsibility.

Many of us use the concepts of optimism and hope interchangeably, often cast as the naïve wishes of the ignorant. But, in my eyes, they are very different. Optimism is the belief that the world is getting better, irrespective of what we do or decide. Hope is the belief that we can *make this world better*.<sup>8</sup> It is a passion for making possible the aspirational.<sup>9</sup> In the words of Noam Chomsky, “[U]nless you believe that the future can be better, it’s unlikely you will step up and take responsibility for making it so. If you assume that there’s no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope.”<sup>10</sup> The anatomy of hope begins with lifting our eyes, seeing our desired future, and choosing to do all we can to shape it.

In the Talmud we read of a man named Honi who was troubled all his life by this verse from Psalm 126: “When God brought back those who returned to Zion [after 70 years], we were like dreamers.” Honi asked, is it possible for 70 years to be like a dream?” The rabbis go on to recount that Honi then journeyed on a road, and saw an elderly man planting carob seeds in the desert. Honi asked, “How long will it take for the seeds to grow into trees and produce fruit?” “70 years,” the man replied. “Do you really think you’ll live for another 70 years to see the fruits of your labor?!” asked Honi. “The man replied, “I found already grown carob trees in this world; as my ancestors planted them, so too do I plant these for future generation.”

The rabbis imagine that Honi takes a nap nearby. And, like a Jewish Rip-van-Winkle, he wakes up 70 years later and opens his eyes to a lush orchard of carob trees. He sees a familiar elderly man gathering carob seeds. “Are you the same one who planted these trees?” “No,” the man replied, “I am his grandson. This grove was his dream. And now I go to plant these seeds for the next generation.” And finally Honi understands the Psalmist. The dreamers are those who plant the seeds towards our shared future. They are those who carry the courage of hope.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Numerous experiments point to the relationship between adversity and hope – the presence of adversity and the experience of agency amidst it dramatically affects longterm resilience and determination. At the core, this is the difference between optimism and hope – the latter is forged out of struggle, and holds the potency for endurance in the face of future struggle. For more, see Sheena Iyengar’s “The Art of Choosing.”

<sup>9</sup> Based on Paul Ricoeur’s “a passion for the possible.”

<sup>10</sup> Noam Chomsky and Heinz Dieterich, *Latin America: From Colonization to Globalization*, 1999, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 23a

Our purpose goes beyond this moment. If we listen carefully enough we can hear the whispers of future generations 70 years from now. We can imagine their hopes, their needs, their yearnings. We can feel a pull of responsibility that urges us to action. Rather than burning, blocking, or barring, what if the only viable path is seed-planting? What if, like our ancestors of the Torah, like Isaac turning to reunite his fractured family, our task today is most urgently defined by lifting our eyes? What if the most courageous thing we can do is to gaze beyond this moment and ponder our possible future? What if our most weighty task is to shape the world of our grandchildren?

Two weeks after my visit to the school, I received an email. As the email itself would make clear, it was from the same student who called out questioning the purpose of hope. She wrote, "I have felt such fury. People seem indifferent to death, they care about some and not others. And honestly, I thought the school was being racist by even bringing you in to speak. I wasn't ready for it that day. Or the next. But I'm tired of just being angry, as though somehow yelling at people makes anything better. So I tried your exercise of imagining the future. I tried it with my friends, and then my family. And I'm writing really just to say thanks. Because maybe there is another way. And maybe there is a point to hoping."

As we enter this new year, as we prepare to mark this first year of grief over all that we have lost, we notice the dawn of the future asking us to lift our eyes. We come back to the same moment, back to this same place, so we can remember the seeds our ancestors planted for us. And we return to our Jewish story and raise our eyes to the horizon, to be the generations of dreamers courageous enough to hope.

I ask of everyone in this community, in this new year, lift your eyes. Feel a future that calls to you with purpose. Rise, not from fury or from shame, but from the fervent belief that the only path to a brighter tomorrow is one blazed and built by us. The seeds we plant this day shape the future shared by all. Whether you stand at the center or at the periphery, I ask that you dare to take one step closer into the heart of this community, to roll up the sleeves just an inch more, and to see this, this space, this community, as the most important response to this time.

For it is here that we sow the seeds of dreamers.  
And it is here, together, that we walk the courageous path of hope.