**RH-1: A Song of Ascent: Hope at a Time of Darkness**

In springtime of the year 586 BCE, the armies of the Babylonian empire laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. The city’s destruction, the burning of the Holy Temple, the exile of its people, would soon follow. All the while, the prophet Jeremiah sat in prison, accused of treason. And now, as the Babylonian conquest was imminent, he sat forgotten and alone. Then, we learn in the *Tanakh*:

Jeremiah said: The word of the LORD came to me: Hanamel, the son of your uncle will come to you and say, “Buy my land in in the town of Anatoth, which will soon be laid to waste; for it is you is next in line to purchase it.” (Jeremiah 32:6-7)

Now think about that for a minute. The apocalypse is about to begin...the end of the world....And God is suddenly a real estate agent? Really? And what kind of deal could this be? Who buys property in a land under siege, one which is about to be destroyed? But Hanamel comes with the offer, and Jeremiah complies. He buys the property. And God instructs him:

Thus says the God of Israel: “Take these documents, this deed of purchase, and put them into an earthen jar, so that they may last a long time. For houses, fields, *and vineyards shall one day again be purchased in this land.”* (Jeremiah 32:14-15)

And now Jeremiah understood. His people needed no more warnings, no more rebukes. What they needed was hope. After his many failed attempts to get the Israelites to change their ways, God’s message was clear. Now it was time to turn away from his anger and sadness, in order to make room for faith. “Buy the land,” God commands. “Invest yourself in **hope**.”

As we come to the start of a New Year, we who have tasted a hint of a world under siege, we, too, are in search of hope; of an antidote to our despair. It is hard to believe that it is just a little less than a year ago that we experienced the worst single day of Jews being murdered since the Shoah on what is now called in Israel *Shabbat Shahurah—*the black Sabbath of October 7th. It was the same day that we were about to begin celebrating Simhat Torah.

It is hard to believe that as we begin a New Year there are over 100 hostages who remain held in captivity in Gaza. It is hard to believe that a war still rages not only now in Gaza, but in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen as well.

And here in the United States, it is hard to believe that we begin a new school year at universities across the country where so many Jewish students continue to feel it is unsafe to proclaim that they support the State of Israel; or to wear clothing on campus that identifies them as Jews. It is hard to believe that we are less than five weeks away from national elections in this country in which we are as divided in our politics as I can remember in my lifetime; a time when an increasing number of families have topics of conversation that are simply off limits when gathered around their holiday tables.

I want to suggest that our first order of **collective** business together as we prepare to usher in a New Year is to acknowledge that it has been a difficult year. Because the way in which we begin to lift ourselves from pain and fear to hope and possibility is to begin by lifting up one another.

Our Talmud in *Masechet Berakhot* 5b teaches: “A prisoner cannot generally free herself from prison but instead depends on others to release her from the shackles.” Today, we must help one another be released from the shackles of despondency.

Let me acknowledge that characterizing the **collective** pain that we have experienced in the past year is not meant to negate the fact that many of us in this room have experienced moments of immense joy: births, weddings, anniversaries, and triumphs—both personal and professional. Here, too, let me also make room for those of you who have experienced **personal** misfortune: deaths of loved ones; loss of health; disappointments both personal and professional.

But I ask you to take this journey with me into an acknowledgement of the **collective pain** that has characterized this past year for so many of us—and allow me to take you first on an exploration of **two examples** of Jewish spiritual technologies that show us how to maintain our humanity in the midst of these most trying of times. Because as a people who has known its fair share of traumas over the centuries, our Jewish tradition is rife with mechanisms that can help us move in the direction of hope—and even healing.

And after reviewing these two spiritual technologies, I will then share three examples of individuals who have offered us a vision of what it means to live out that hope—even when their own worlds became shattered.

First, let me share with you a teaching from the Talmud that encapsulates the Jewish capacity for hope in the midst of darkness. It comes from the tractate on Sukkot (53a and b).

Rav Hisda said to one of the Sages: Have you heard the reason that King David composed the 15 songs of ascent? Here, R. Hisda is referring to Psalms 120-134—psalms that each begin with the Hebrew phrase: *Shir Ha’Ma’a lot—*A Song of Ascents. R. Hisda said: “At the time that David dug the drainpipes in Jerusalem, the depths of floodwaters rose and sought to inundate the world. So that by reciting these 15 Songs of Ascent, David caused the flooding to subside.”

Now imagine this scene: It has been revealed to King David that the very place on which he now stands is the same place where one day, the *Beit Ha’Mikdash—*the Temple—will be built. Only now a great flood has arrived and threatened to swallow him up. And yet, in this very place he will lay the foundation. Here is where 15 steps will one day be built; steps that our ancestors will climb to make pilgrimage to the Temple. But as the floods were coming and threatening to destroy his vision, King David composed these 15 psalms, and he caused the flood waters to subside.

Writing more than 20 centuries later, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch would see in these 15 psalms **not** a response to averting the **particular** catastrophe of a flood. Instead, Rabbi Hirsch would see in these psalms a Jewish spiritual technology for responding to the many times in Jewish history when we would need *Shirei Ha’Ma’a lot---*Songs of Ascent—songs to give us strength to rise above the many circumstances in the course of our history when we felt as though we might drown—both literally and figuratively.

So that when floods threatened to devour the world, these 15 psalms of ascent would carry the Jewish people throughout time with a ladder of ascent out of the darkness. So that at any time our world might be filled with darkness, we could return to these psalms; we could return to a vision of building 15 stairs to lead us out of the flood.

A second example: Let me share with you a contemporary voice of hope among our people—words written by the Israeli novelist David Grossman—who wrote these words a few months after his son Uri was killed in Southern Lebanon by a Hezbollah missile in 2006.

*How can I talk of hope when the reality I’m living in brings so much despair?*

*Hope, I thought over and over again, trying to awaken it inside me. I called to it, out loud, in Hebrew – perhaps it speaks Hebrew – tikva, tikva. I thought about Israel’s national anthem, which is called “Hatikva” – “the hope” – and speaks of the hope held by Jews for 2,000 years in exile, the hope of one day being able to live in their own country. It was a hope that often kept them alive. One could look at hope as a kind of “anchor,” cast from a stifled, desperate existence, toward a better, freer future. Toward a reality that does not yet exist, which is made up mostly of wishes. Of imagination. When the anchor is cast, it takes hold of the future, and human beings – sometimes an entire society – begin to pull themselves toward it.*

Commenting on these words,Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum notes that the root of the Hebrew word *Tikvah—*hope—is *Kav—*which is the word for **line.** Hope emerges from the ability to create a **line** toward the horizon so that you don’t get stuck in the reality of the moment. Which does not mean that we are blind to the realities of the pain—and sometimes, the evil—that exists in this moment. Instead, hope begins with the capacity to look beyond the moment towards the expanse of the **possible**—in Hebrew towards the *efsharut.* *Efsharut,* possibility, comes from the root *pesher—*which translates to meaning or explanation. That which is **possible** is born out of our capacity to **make meaning.** Which does not mean that we detach ourselves from reality. Rather, we use it as a means to bring ourselves to a *better reality within reality.*

In the words of David Grossman, hope is an anchor tossed into the distant future by which we orient ourselves in the present. And we use the anchor—in the midst of the storm—to help us find within ourselves the strength to pull ourselves towards that horizon. But hope, Grossman reminds us, will not happen alone. If it is **only** about yourself, hope is a *point*—not a *line*. Hope requires people working together—for a line requires a multiplicity of points. Only in that way will it become a *kav ha’hayim—*a line of life. As we begin this New Year together, we must join together to create lines of hope.

Now let me share with you three examples of how hope is created out of the darkest of places—all examples from the State of Israel—which has been in a state of extended mourning for close to a year. But these visions of hope speak to us as reminders of what the best of humanity can look like in the darkest of times.

Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum is, among other things, the founding rabbi of Congregation *Tziyon* in Jerusalem, a *Masorti* congregation serving a diverse cross-section of Israelis—both religious and secular. She writes about the many soldiers who went to Gaza to serve in the IDF and who came back looking for a re-connection to their Judaism. Many of them had lost close friends in combat. Many of them had grown up in *kibbutzim* or in secular homes disconnected from the tradition. But they would come after their military service had ended and find themselves in her synagogue in Jerusalem. She would ask them: Do you want to offer a prayer: Do you want to say the *Birkat Ha’Gomel—*the blessing that one says after returning from a time of danger? And she says that it was almost universal—from the infantry soldier, to the elite combat soldier—over and over again, the prayer that they asked to recite was *Tefilat l’Shalom l’Medina—*the prayer for Peace in the land. That is what every one of the soldiers who came to her synagogue asked to pray.

And here is a second story, the story of Ben Zussman, z”l the son of Sarit and Tzvi Zussman who had both made *Aliyah* to Israel—and who had raised their family there—and whose son died in combat in Gaza in January of this year. Every soldier, before they go to combat, is asked to write a letter that would be delivered to their family in the event they do not return home. I want to read you a couple of paragraphs of the letter that Ben Zussman wrote to his parents that they opened after he had been killed in Gaza. Ben wrote:

“Even if something happens to me, I do not allow you to sink into sadness. I had the privilege to fulfill my dream and my destiny, and you can be sure that I am looking down on you with a big smile. Perhaps I’ll sit next to Grandfather and bridge some gaps. Each one will share their experiences and what has changed between wars, and we’ll talk a bit about politics, and I’ll ask him for his opinion.

If, God forbid, you are sitting shiva (in mourning), turn it into a week of friends, family, and joy. Have food, definitely meat, beer, sweet drinks, seeds, tea, and of course, Mom’s cookies. Laugh, listen to stories, meet all my friends you haven’t seen yet. Seriously, I envy you. I would like to be there to see everyone.

And so Sarit and Tzvi Zussman honored their son’s wishes. After the 30-day period of *Sheloshim* had ended, the Zussman’s rented a large banquet hall in which they invited their extended family and many friends—filled with a great deal of beer—because Ben loved beer. And everyone drank beer, and then Tzvi Zussman stood up. In front of everyone and said Ben commanded us to live and to have joy and I want to say *L’chaim*—and they said *L’chaim*.

And two more messengers of hope in a time of great darkness, words that many of you have heard from Jon and Rachel Goldberg-Polin, parents of Hersh z”l. Here are excerpts of the words that Jon Goldberg-Polin spoke at his son’s funeral:

“Hersh, we failed you. We all failed you. You would not have failed you. You would have pushed harder for justice. You would have worked to understand the other, to bridge differences. You would have challenged more people to challenge their own thinking.

“And what you would have been pushing for now is to ensure that your death, the death of all the soldiers, and so many innocent civilians, are not in vain,” Jon Polin said.

And his wife Rachel concluded her words at her son’s funeral with these words: “Now my Hersh, I ask for your help, as we transform our hope into grief in this new, unknown brand of pain. I beg of you, Hersh, please do what you can do to have your light shine down” on the whole family, she says. “Help shower us with healing and resilience. Help us to rise again. I pray that your death will be a turning point in this horrible situation we are in.”

These are the true heroes in Israel. The ones who refuse to allow us to give in to despair, despite the horrors of the world as we know it. 75 years after the people of Israel once again returned to their ancient homeland, they created a state whose National Anthem has been the mission statement of the Jewish people: *Ha’Tikvah.* These words, written by Naftali Hertz Imber, were written in Poland in 1878, a full 70 years before international recognition would come for the State of Israel. But Imber wrote the words: *od lo avda tikvatenu,* “our hope is not yet lost.”

Now, in this New Year, we, too must find a way to sing *Shirei Ha’Ma’a lot—*songs of ascent—even at a time when our hearts are breaking. Especially at a time when our hearts are breaking. So that together, amidst the darkness, we will secure lines of hope toward a distant horizon of peace—and many blessings. *Kein yi’he ratzon—*So may it be.

Please rise and join with me as we conclude these words—together—with the singing of *Ha’Tikvah.*