

Good morning and Shana Tova!

I want to start by asking you if you know what is the difference between a Jewish pessimist and a Jewish optimist?

The pessimist is angry about rising inflation and the cost of living, he worries about rising antisemitism and the lack of affiliation in synagogues. She is disgusted by politics and politicians, and says, “Things just can’t get any worse.” To which the Jewish optimist says, “Sure they can.”

I think that many of us this morning would call ourselves Jewish optimists.

Because this past year was... how should we say... nothing short of disastrous and many of us fear it is only going to get worse.

Unprecedented extreme weather events all around the world and here in the US. Floods and storms costing the lives of thousands, fires and droughts destroying homes and livelihoods.

We have known it for a while but have been painfully reminded this year that extreme climate change is a frightening reality.

And the US is now averaging thirteen mass shootings a week, from a July 4th parade to a Texas elementary school. Malls, medical buildings, and parks - it seems as if nowhere is safe. How could it be that so many have become hardened to gun violence?

And politics. I don’t need to say another word. POLITICS. It’s enough to point out that over 64% of adults on both sides of the political spectrum agree that our political system is ineffective, crumbling, paralyzed by partisanship, and that our democracy is truly at risk.

Recent Supreme Court decisions to remove federal constitutional protections on a women’s right to make her own medical choices regarding abortions have blurred the delicate lines of division between church and state, for so many - it became impossible not to fear a future of dystopian legislation which limits the rights of minorities and marginalized communities.

We are living in a world dominated by the growing power and influence of social media, fake news, and the pressure of a WOK society where it seems impossible to express your opinion without risking being “canceled” or being made to feel ashamed for your thoughts or words.

And let us not forget the war in Ukraine continuing with no end in sight. Did I mention hunger? Iran’s nuclear ambitions? Our incarceration problem?

When you reflect on all of these, it is no wonder that 78% of Americans (the highest in history) say they are extremely worried about their lives. Or the staggering 56% of young Americans who say they feel down and hopeless.

Couple that with the challenges we all experience in our personal lives...

The horrible news from the doctor, the pains of growing old, the fight with our own, or a loved one’s addiction, or mental health disease. Relationships gone bad, financial insecurity, or loneliness in the aftermath of over two years of COVID pandemic.

The sense of despair is real.

And I want to be sure and clarify that I’m talking about despair not about depression. Depression is a crippling mental health disorder that affects approximately 10% of Americans. Those suffering from it may find it difficult or impossible to get out of bed, they may lose interest in work, hobbies, and social interactions. Despair differs in that individuals can still go about day-to-day tasks and can generally function quite normally.

BUT this does not make it any less serious. When in despair, we feel a complete loss of hope, anguish, and sadness. There is no joy in life. No passion. Instead, desperation, anxiety and hopelessness fill big parts of the day.

And I must be honest and share with you that over this past year, I too have felt quite overwhelmed, scared, and even paralyzed. In these dark times, like so many others, it feels like we are barely hanging on.

But I am sure no one sitting here today came to High Holy Day services to hear their rabbi say he's given up. And you will not hear that because I have not.

In these challenging times, and on these sacred holy days, I turn to our Jewish teachings to glean wisdom on how to face these challenges. And the Jewish answer is clear - Jewish tradition reminds us in the strongest conceivable way that we are **the choosers of life, guardians of dreams, advocates of hope.**

In our current world, it's easy to feel a sense of hopelessness, that everything is bad, most or all of the time, that people are evil and selfish, that politicians are crooks, that God is silent and that we are doomed. That nothing is ever going to really change, and that if it does -it will only get worse, as we know -Jewish optimism.

But just like gratitude, mindfulness, and awareness – hope is a Jewish discipline that we must choose and practice every single day. And the more we practice it, the easier it is to embrace.

And let's just stop here for a moment and remind ourselves of the difference between hope and optimism **optimism is a cheery disposition which leads us to always look at the bright side of life and to have the belief that things will turn out alright even despite the evidence; hope makes no such assumption. Hope is a more active and radical ideal that recognizes the real possibility of failure, yet at the same time holds on to the prospect of success despite the odds, driven by a deep commitment to an outcome we value.**

The activist Mariame Kaba teaches that "Hope doesn't preclude feeling sadness, frustration, or anger," I can still have hope and not despair even if I am not optimistic, and I need this hope because it is the motivating power to never give up."

It takes courage to have hope.

It takes discipline.

And effort.

Which leads to the obvious question, how do we muster the fortitude to hope in dark times?

As a people, we tell stories.

Stories teach us life lessons, stories help us create a reality, they help us see the world from a broader viewpoint and help us reject the *oy gevult*-theory of Jewish history.

We tell stories that offer us a perspective of hope.

We can tell funny stories like the one about the rabbi captured by Kozaks during a Pogrom in the midst of winter and before they kill him, he is offered a last meal.

The rabbi asks for strawberries. “Strawberries?” the Kozaks ask. “But they're out of season!”

“It's okay,” said the rabbi. “I'll wait...”

We tell stories, known as a Midrash, like the one about four rabbis walking amongst the ruins of the temple in Jerusalem looking at what was – with no doubt – the greatest tragedy to ever happen to our people. Three began to cry as they saw and realized the enormity of the loss. But one of them, Rabbi Akiva, began to laugh. “How can you laugh at this time?” they asked with anger – to which he answered. “Now that we have proof of the Biblical prophecy that Jerusalem will be reduced to rubble is true, we can hope that the vision of the Prophet Zechariah that Jerusalem will be rebuilt – will too be fulfilled.”

When feeling despair, we do what Rabbi Akiva did– we take a deep breath, we try to smile, and we remember that what we see and experience now, is just a singular point in history and that we, the Jewish People, we carry with us a perspective constructed over thousands of years in which our people faced different yet in many ways much more challenging times than we do today, and they prevailed – to tell their story.

We tell stories.

Stories from the Torah. We don't just do it because that's "How we always did it". We read stories from the Torah because we can and should learn from them.

On Rosh Hashanah we read from Genesis the story of Hagar and Ishmael being cast-out of Abraham's life – losing everything they have, reaching a level of despair where only death seems to Hagar as a possible escape from their suffering - only to have her eyes opened, at the last moment, by an angel, so that she can see that right near her is a flowing spring.

And we continue with the archetype story of despair, Abraham binding his son Isaac to the altar, let the story take you to the despair Isaac is feeling, being tied to the altar realizing that he is the sacrifice being offered. Imagine his despair, being betrayed by his own father for reasons he cannot understand.

Once again only to have an angel cause Abraham to lift his eyes, and see the ram caught in the bush. To see that there is another option.

When you hear the shofar blast today – let it serve as a reminder that even when you feel binded to a reality that seems unchangeable, like Isaac, do not give up on hope.

Or the story of Hannah in our Haftarah we will read tomorrow, Hannah praying in tears to God to give her a child. Is there a greater sense of despair than that of a barren woman praying for a child? And her prayers – against all odds, were answered.

We draw inspiration from stories. Stories about the infinite power we have as humans to hold on to hope in the most desperate of times.

We tell the story of Hanukkah and recall the words of Rabbi David Hartman who taught that to live as a Jew requires the courage to dream and aspire for a better tomorrow...The miracle of Hanukkah is all about the courage to imagine a different future, and then to fight for that future without certainty as to the outcome of our fight.

We tell Viktor Frankl's story- his experiences as a prisoner in four different Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz. And we pay careful attention to his most important message - For Viktor Frankl observed that those who survived the longest were not necessarily the most physically fit but rather those who had an inner spiritual strength.

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's own attitude in any given set of circumstances—to choose one's own way.”

The ones who survived were the ones who had the discipline to maintain a sense of hope even in the darkest of times, even in the darkest of places.

I'm not some Pollyanna, naïvely trying to claim everything is going to be OK. There are circumstances beyond our control, but we can choose how we deal with them. All we can do is make the best of our challenges – and keep waiting, and working, for a better day ahead.

So, this year I challenge you to set a resolution, a Jewish New Year's resolution – unlike the top ten of the January 1st resolutions (lose weight; exercise more; learn a new hobby....) I challenge you to adopt the practice of hope. I challenge you to discipline yourself and adopt a practice of being hopeful. I challenge you to believe, even despite the evidence, and in face of the real possibility of failure, that there is a chance that things can and will get better. That it is a Jewish value to strive to improve first ourselves and then the world around us, and that we cannot do this if we lose hope that this change is possible.

And the High Holy Days offer us the well-known formula of how to practice hope - Teshuvah, Tefilah, Tzedakah or in other words - We practice hope through our attitude, our intention, and our actions.

Teshuvah can be understood as our attitude – as our ability to choose to turn away from despair and rather turn to the image of divinity in ourselves and others, to know that all you can control is your actions- all you can do is be the change you seek to see.

Teshuva means that it is our responsibility to turn the attitude of those living in despair around us. That you and I can be that angel that opens the eyes of Hagar and Abraham and all those living in despair. That you and I can be the blast of the shofar, calling ourselves and others to lift up our eyes and see a preferable outcome.

But this my friends, is not a sprint, it's a marathon, it's a long road, one which we might never see the end of. The change we are seeking, be it a healthier environment, end to gun violence, or the reversal of a supreme court decision, might not happen soon enough for us to see. And yet, we must be the carriers of hope, if not for ourselves then for our children and grandchildren and those who come after them.

We have all heard the phrase “there is a light at the end of the tunnel.” But if you really think about it, when you are in the darkest part of the tunnel, you cannot see the light at the end. There is no promise of a romanticized happy outcome.

Rav Kook taught that: “If you find yourself in a dark place, don't waste your time cursing the darkness, just light a candle. That is the Jewish way.”

What Rav Kook teaches us then, is that regardless of whether we can see that light at the end of the tunnel or not, and regardless of how dark our world is, we must still hope. For without hope, there is no possibility of action, and without action, there will be no desired change. We must be the ones lighting the candle.

Tefilah- prayer – is about discipline. Tefilah helps us define our intentions. When we stop and take the time, to think, to meditate, to pray – we are giving ourselves the time, space, and the opportunity to find and connect to our own inner strength. Standing still, humbling ourselves and sharpening our awareness- allows for us to find perspective, to find the balance between despair and hope, between the possibility of failure and the promise of success. Did you know that the only time

during the year when the word “hope” occurs in our prayers is during services on these High Holy Days? In the middle of the Amidah, we ask God to “Grant hope to those who seek You.” It is no mistake, that as we begin a New Year, as we reenergize ourselves, realign ourselves with life’s most important values, with our own better selves- we ask for the ability to hope, we remind ourselves that we are seekers of hope, not spreaders of despair.

And finally, Tzedkah – understood as the one step beyond our attitude and our intention – Tzedakah represents our actions. Tzedakah is our ability to create a more righteous, just, and equitable world and to do so by giving to others in countless ways– with our money, time, effort, with a word of kindness or civility, with compassion and patience. When we give to others, we remind them and us- that they are not alone in this dark tunnel, we remind them and us of the inherent goodness that exists- I BELIEVE- in each and every human being.

Our mission as a community is not just to entertain each other, to play golf or cards together, to dine and travel together. We are a sacred community, and we are here to hold and support each other in times of despair. We can be that person that goes around their community sharing the bread we have with others, lighting the candle in the dark tunnel.

Our Talmud in Brachot 5b teaches “A prisoner cannot generally free themselves from prison but depends on others to release him from his shackles.” Today, tomorrow, and every day afterwards we must help one another be released from the shackles of despair.

I want to end with the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who reminds us that Jewish hope, is different than how most people understand hope. Our hope, Jewish hope is much more difficult than what we dub as “Hallmark hope” or “Disney hope.” It is not a hope that guarantees happy endings. It is not a hope that makes everything better. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: “Hope is a conviction, rooted in trust...in an ability to soar above the darkness that overshadows the divine.”

Adonai our God, we well know that this New Year will not bring with it an end to violence and to terror. It will not bring an end to intolerance and to hate. It may

not even bring an end to illness and suffering, or even fully heal broken hearts. So, all we ask of you is to give us the strength and the discipline to do as our people have done for thousands of years before us and to continue to grasp onto our thread of Tikva, our thread of hope.

Let this be a year in which we allow the light of hope, to cast away the darkness of despair. The year in which we soar above darkness to see your divine image in ourselves and others.

God, please grant us the ability to be choosers of life, guardians dreams, advocates of hope.