

A JEW DOESN'T LOSE HOPE

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Hope is the palpable feeling that goodness is going to emerge in the world; the uplifting, sometimes even joyful experience of anticipating good things to come. It's like warm bread; it not only fills us up, it fuels our contentment—whatever else is happening in our lives, things look and feel better when we're hopeful. We run on hope; when it fades or disintegrates, despair and depression replace it, and we become immobilized or worse.

But how are we to feel hopeful when the possibilities are so bleak, when what we love and cherish is threatened, and nagging fear has replaced what once seemed to be an impenetrable security?

Is hope always accessible, even in the worst of times? And, if so, how are we to regain it? To what extent are we responsible for our own hopefulness or lack of it? And what's the link between being Jewish and our hopefulness?

Our deepest source of hope as Jews is the history of our people and our civilization—that we've survived!—and what has followed throughout the world from that history.

Our common historical root is the liberation and exodus from Egypt, and the extraordinary events at Mount Sinai—*Mattan Torah*, giving and receiving the law, the covenant between God and the “mixed multitude,” which then became the Israelites. For the first time morality was understood as the supreme moral will of God. Prescribed behavior reflected not the fickle will of warring gods, but eternal definitions of moral right and wrong. The law reflected predictable uplifting or degrading consequences, given the will of the One Creator, as revealed in the workings of creation.

Moreover, morality was never again to be an entirely private matter. The whole people, acting together as one, accepted the covenant, thus the whole people became responsible for one another's observance and moral lapses. The covenant is not

merely a theological idea, then, but marks the creation of a moral spiritual community, binding together in a nation the communal life of a body of people through their assumption of a shared moral “yoke.” No longer were we alone in finding the path and staying on it.

Liberation shattered the ancient paradigm of social life and relations—that all existed in permanently fixed orbits. For the first time it was possible to conceive of human life uplifted for thousands, even millions. This radical transformation of consciousness was the underpinning for all subsequent social and political revolutions—and a source of everlasting hope.

Much later, about a century after the first exiles returned to Jerusalem following the Babylonian *galut* (diaspora) “a solemn convocation took place in which the law of God was formally enacted as binding upon the community with ‘a curse and an oath.’” That action is preserved in the narrative prayer of Ezra. The painful experiences of the community, its poverty and subjugation, were attributed to the failure of the people to observe the law. So the priests, Levites, and princes declared an official orthodoxy, that “the covenant is primarily the oath to obey the accumulated tradition . . . as canonized in the Torah.”

The Torah is the *method* of achieving hope—in effect it embodies the principles and pathways that sustain hope.

Our greatest pain and suffering—the challenges to remaining hopeful—often come not from events themselves, but from our confusion and uncertainty when faced with moral dilemmas. The problem, typically, is not about choosing between right and wrong—most of us see that choice, agonize briefly, and make it quickly. No—despair comes when the choice is between two seemingly evil or good possibilities. It's in making those choices and living

with the consequences that we need concrete help to sustain our hope when it's strained.

Our continued hope lies in the covenantal commitment to Torah as the unimpeachable guide for our day-to-day lives, our recognition that "even in the worst of times, in your *mitzvot* (commandments) our hope is found."

The covenant, *brit* or cutting, is an archaic form in social life that is related to hope. Its antecedent is the cutting of a sacrificial animal in two parts and having parties to a contract pass between them, a symbolic identification of those making promises with the animal that was slaughtered. It's a graphic way of demonstrating the fate of one who contemplates violating the covenant, thereby disappointing the hope of the other party to the agreement.

The *brit milah*, the rite of circumcision, which is an adjunct to the Covenant, is another important Jewish source of hope. The circumcision itself is but a momentary and quickly passing instant of discomfort for the newborn baby, without meaning until much later in life. It is the parents and, to a lesser extent, family and friends and members of the community, for whom the rite is a powerful and long lasting source of hope.

The power of the physical act itself, when connected with the religious ritual, cannot go unnoticed or be experienced with indifference by the parents. In a manner of speaking, it bludgeons them into consciousness of their newly acquired responsibility for the moral career of this individual that they have brought into the world. To a lesser extent, most of the family and friends and community members who are present also feel some pull of responsibility for that individual's moral career.

Not only is the new life a source of hope in itself, but the commitment of the parents, family, friends, and community to ensure that that life will be one dedicated to righteousness cannot help but reinforce over the years their hopefulness with every act they contribute to the child's moral career.

The weekly Shabbat is not only an ongoing training ground for our moral careers, but an extraordinarily deep well of hope for the Jewish people. Shabbat marks an incremental step toward the Days of Mashiach (Messiah) and our redemption, over which we exercise great control.

Although we are commanded to "keep" and "guard" the Sabbath, possibly more important is the expression *la'asot*, that we are "to make" the Sabbath. Shabbat is not something that happens to us, but something that we cause to happen.

What is it we do to make it happen?

Shabbat happens when we cease trying to control the creative forces in our environment, in other people, and in ourselves. It's a time of not living in the ordinary sense, but learning how to live ex-

traordinarily. It's a time of recreation, re-creating our selves by reclaiming our Torah tradition of wisdom, which holds out a vision and path of liberation for our spirits and bodies. It's a time to be with those we love, a time of *gemilut hasadim* (loving-kindness). It's a time when we discover that we are loved and lovable and that the world need not always be a cold, cruel place.

There is a crucial link between the covenant, the Sabbath, and the Days of Mashiach—each leads to the next. When the skeptics and cynics dismiss the potential of bringing Days of Mashiach, those who keep Shabbat answer that they have already experienced it, if only for one day in the week. That experience is made possible through our covenantal learning and teaching every week that God and humankind have an ability to respond together to "complete" the creation, to co-create a world of righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness.

There are two competing kinds of faith that underpin our ability to respond—one directed externally and the other directed internally. The *external faith* is a *conscious confidence* or trust that, if we satisfy the conditions established by Torah, God will act lovingly and compassionately to provide for our needs. This is mostly faith in *God's responsibility* or ability to respond. The *internal faith* can be thought of as an *internalized conviction* or motivation (i.e., not in the conscious mind yet usually demonstrated in *our* action) regarding the possibility for good to emerge in the world, despite our consciously recollected reason and experience to the contrary. This is faith in *our responsibility* or ability to respond.

Both types of faith regard the human capacity for goodness to be created by God. The external type of faith reflects a belief that God has created within us the wherewithal to believe that *God can act* in ways that are entirely outside of our reason and experience. Here "leap of faith" means we set aside our reason and experience to believe that God will create greater goodness in the world. The internal type of faith reflects a belief that, because of what God has created within us, *we can act* in ways that are entirely outside of our reason and experience. Here "leap of faith" means that we allow ourselves to create greater goodness in the world even though our reason and experience may reject that possibility. Most of us experience these two types of faith to a greater or lesser degree; they're not mutually exclusive.

What are the connections between faith and hope?

With external faith, we become more hopeful when our confidence in God's action is borne out by events, although we can sustain hope by prayer,

notwithstanding discouraging events. With internal faith, sometimes we fail to recognize this faith *as* faith, and thus we fail to act on it. That is, although for inexplicable reasons we feel motivated to create more goodness in the world, maybe even taking first steps to do so, when we begin to reason and recollect our prior failed experience we decide that we must be “out of our mind” to continue.

But if we don’t misunderstand our faith and, instead, allow it to operate as a stimulus, its manifestation in our action to create goodness is the most important source of reinforcement for our hopefulness. So every completed act of goodness that we create through our own initiative gives us greater hope that goodness will emerge in the world. And to the extent that we choose to associate with other people who are also committed to actively creating goodness, consciously avoiding people who are not doing so, we stimulate and reinforce our own hopefulness.

Yet withal, one might reply: that’s all well and good, but the world in which I’m living is a devastating destroyer of hope.

Is it possible to open our eyes and look directly into the sickness and death around us—and not lose hope? Can we look into the world of terrorism, war, violent crime, toxic pollution, and political corruption—and somehow remain hopeful?

Is it possible to feel sustained and hopeful as we read King Solomon’s words in *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), that, “all is vanity” (i.e., emptiness)? How can

there be hope in the consciousness that everything is futile?

Because from Solomon we learn that we are not alone in this vale of tears. All of us together share these painful circumstances, and together we can help to bring Days of Mashiach.

But of course there are no quick or simple solutions. Our God with whom we covenant is a God of history, willingly sharing with us the power of creation as co-producers, but over the course of decades and centuries, if not millennia.

So we can understand why it’s said in *Midrash Rabbah* that, “everything is bound up with waiting”? But in what ways are suffering, sanctification of God’s Name, and desire for Days of Mashiach bound up with waiting?

Rabbi Enoch Zundel ben Joseph of Bialystok (d. 1867), commentator on the Midrash, reminds us that when we suffer and struggle together, we hope with faith for relief. We hope to sanctify the Name of God, to do an important act with our lives that praises God and goodness. We hope for Days of Mashiach, through willingness to wait, not in passive receptivity, but refusing to give up hope by constant initiative and application of Torah teaching, working at *tikun olam* (repairing the world).

A Jew doesn’t lose hope because, even when waiting for goodness to emerge, a Jew refuses to give up working to create goodness—which in turn sustains hope.

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