

SPIRITUAL OPTIMISM: FINDING THE TUNNEL

Rabbi Marc Margolius

Rosh Hashanah Day Two, 5775

You may know the one about the Jewish pessimist and the Jewish optimist. The Jewish pessimist says “Oy, things are so bad, they can’t possibly get any worse!” The Jewish optimist says, “Of course they can!”

This joke describes a very real, dark side of the Jewish perspective on life. Unfortunately, I have to admit that it resonates with me. I’m the kind of person who, on the first day of Daylight Savings Time, starts worrying about when the days will get shorter and darker. When I see the first green leaves of open in spring, I’m already mourning their death in the fall. I am completely committed to preparing for worst case scenarios. Maybe some of you can relate.

This year, as usual, there’s plenty of fodder to feed our pessimism. Aside from the myriad challenges Israel faces, we confront huge, apparently intractable social problems like global warming, income inequality, starvation. We face pandemics like Ebola as well as international crises in Ukraine, Sudan, the Middle East. We’re immersed in a war without end against terrorism. Our completely dysfunctional political system feels beyond repair. Sometimes, it’s hard to read or watch the news without despairing for the future of our species and our planet.

In rabbinic tradition, Rosh Hashanah became known as Yom Ha-Din, the Day of Judgment. This demands some reinterpretation for those of us who don’t believe in an external, supernatural God who sits on high, judging us and our actions. Today, maybe we can interpret Yom ha-Din, the Day of Judgment, instead as a Day of Discernment -- a day for noticing our automatic, habitual reactions, and noticing whether those reactions lead us to wisdom and moral growth, or whether they block our way forward to a better life and a better world.

We human beings are hard-wired to judge. We automatically react to data as we receive it, judging it as good, bad, or neutral. No doubt this automatic scanning for potential bad news serves an evolutionary function. It helps us defend ourselves against threats. Our brain’s amygdala functions as an alarm system, protecting us from danger. We are programmed to deal with dangers. Good news is great, but we can always process that later; threats must be confronted immediately. The other aspects of our brain help us continue processing the information and discern if what we are facing is, in fact, a danger – or whether it represents an opportunity.

Winston Churchill said that “the pessimist sees danger in every opportunity; the optimist sees opportunity in every danger.” There is a pessimist in each of us who is constantly scanning incoming data, raising red flags and warning of danger. But within each of us as well there’s an optimist articulating our human creativity and vision, diving into our challenges to raise up fresh possibilities.

We know it’s easy and pleasurable to eat the honey on our apples and pray for a sweet and good year. But in this Shabbat’s Torah reading, Moses says that in the

wilderness the Children of Israel learned to “suckle honey out of a rock.” Honey and apples, easy. But honey from a rock?

The Jewish meditation teacher Rabbi Yoel Glick teaches that to “suckle honey from a rock” is to learn how to access the sweetness in the darkest, densest aspect of our reality, this material world in which we dwell. Drinking honey from the rock is “the essence of **spiritual optimism**.” These Days of Awe, Rabbi Glick teaches, are for cultivating our capacity “to seek out the good that is present even in the moments of difficulty and hardship in our lives.”

Jewish history and our current reality provide plenty of cause of pessimism. We Jews come by our gloominess honestly. And paradoxically, the key to Jewish survival has been our capacity to dream and to foster hope. We are here today only because of people who imagined, created and seized opportunities to survive and renew Jewish life.

We are here because of all those before us who confronted darkness in their day by lighting candles. **To be a Jew has always been to be a spiritual optimist, to cultivate hope even when reason gives us no cause for hope.** This past Sunday, we marched in the footsteps of our predecessors, joining hundreds of thousands of others who are refusing to say that global warming cannot be stopped. *Od lo avda tikaveteinu*: our capacity for hope is a renewable resource within us. It cannot be extinguished.

Happily, there seems to be hope even for pessimists like me. According to psychologist Martin Seligman, optimism is a quality that can be learned and cultivated. We can move from pessimism to optimism if we refuse to let ourselves and our brains be hijacked by our initial fears and failures. In The Shawshank Redemption, the protagonist Andy Dufrene is falsely accused of murder. He’s wrongly imprisoned and sentenced to life in a maximum security prison. Despite every reason for despairing, he maintains that “hope is a good thing, maybe the best thing -- and no good thing ever dies.”

The Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah beautifully illustrate the process by which we might learn optimism in our own lives.

In yesterday’s reading, Abraham and Sarah expel Hagar and Ishmael, leaving them to wander the wilderness of Beersheva with a skin of water which soon runs out. There’s no hope for Ishmael. In total despair, Hagar places Ishmael under a bush and moves a bowshot away, unable to bear watching him die. She sobs.

The text then says: *vayishma Elohim et kol ha’na’ar*, God heard the cry of the child, and a heavenly messenger called, “*mah lach Hagar? Al tir’l ki shama elohim el ko hana’ar ba’asher hu sham* – what’s wrong, Hagar? Fear not – God hears the cry of the child, just where he is. Rise, lift up the child, and take him by the hand, for I will make him a great nation. *Vayiftach elohim et eyneha vateireh be’er mayim* – God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the child drink.

Dark despair hangs over this story -- but it does not have the last word. In the face of anguish and hopelessness, because Hagar and Ishmael cry out, new possibilities emerge. Hagar opens her eyes, and finds salvation: a well of water which apparently had been there all along. Although temporarily blinded by fear and pain, Hagar develops a vision to save her son, and to enable him to realize his own destiny as a great nation.

Likewise, in today's reading, the binding of Isaac, there seems no prospect for a happy ending. A sense of foreboding pervades the passage as Abraham leads Isaac to his death on Mount Moriah. But at the last moment, when all seems lost, as Abraham lifts the knife, an angel calls out to stop him. "*Vayisa Avraham et eynav vayar* -- and Abraham lifted his eyes and looked; *v'hinei ayil ne'echaz ba's'vach b'karnav* -- and behold, there was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns; so Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as an offering instead of his son."

Had Abraham not lifted his eyes and looked, had he not been willing, even in the final seconds, to search for unforeseen and even unforeseeable possibilities, he might have sacrificed his son Isaac, and we might not be here at all. The ram represents an option which had been stuck in the thicket all along, just waiting to be noticed -- if and when someone lifted their eyes, and looked.

A midrash teaches that on Mount Moriah, Abraham actually saw the ram becoming stuck in the thicket and freeing itself over and over. Abraham asked God, "What's the meaning of this?" God explained: "Your descendants, Avraham, will likewise be entangled in distress and redeemed throughout history."

To me this midrash teaches that in any mess, there's always a possibility of finding our way out. There's a ram stuck in a thicket, every moment, every day.

Abraham responds to God: "*Ribbono shel olam*, Master of the Universe, will it always be like this?" "No," God replies. "In the end, the people will be redeemed by the horns of this ram" [Pesikta Rabbati 40:6]. In the end, the shofar always points to the solution which spares our children.

Some say the shofar originated as a folk custom, an attempt to frighten off demons with loud noise. We need not believe in demons to recognize the extent to our world now seems entangled in a web of demonic, chaotic forces. It's easy these days to fall prey to pessimism and despair. But today, the sound of the shofar testifies to the presence of hope even -- or especially -- when we find ourselves stuck in a place of despair.

Technically, a shofar can be made out of the horn of any kosher animal. But our tradition teaches that on Rosh Hashanah, we must specifically use the horn of a ram to remind us of the saving possibility which is ever-present, always waiting in the thicket for us to open our eyes and look for it.

We have lived through a terrible year of blindness and bloodshed. May the shofar this year remind us how the first Jewish father, when faced with his son's death,

remembered to look past fear and pain and use his God-given vision to find a better way.

It may be that Abraham understood this even earlier in the story. As father and son were walking towards the mountain, Isaac asked Abraham, "*Hinei ha-eish v'ha-eitzim, v'ayeh ha-seh l'olah?* Here is the flint and here is the wood -- where is the lamb for an offering?" Abraham replies, "*Elohim yireh lo ha-seh, b'ni* -- God will see to the lamb, my son."

What could Abraham mean -- God will see to the lamb? Wishful thinking? Denial? Blind faith? Maybe even on the way to the mountaintop, Abraham was refusing to yield to anguish. Perhaps a voice within was whispering: "Don't give in to despair. There will be another way. Just keep looking for it. Always, keep looking."

The midrash reminds me of something I heard from Israelis when I visited there at the height of the second intifada, as the peace process was collapsing: "We can see the light at the end of the tunnel -- we just can't find the tunnel." Of course, there is a bitter irony to talk of tunnels after this summer. All tunnels must be found -- tunnels which threaten, and tunnels which lead us to hope.

We descendants of Abraham must be ready to follow his example, lift our eyes and search for a way out. Hope and resourcefulness have always been our way. Even the most cynical, pessimistic among us remember today that to be a Jew is to be a spiritual optimist. *Od lo avda tikvateinu* -- our capacity for hope has never been destroyed, despite everything the world has thrown at us.

When the story ends, Abraham chooses a name for that mountain which altered human history: "*Vayikra Avraham et shem hamakom Adonai yireh*, and Abraham named the place *Adonai yireh*, the Holy One will see, *yei-amer ha-yom, b'har Adonai yei-ra'eh*, as it is called today, on the mount of the Holy One, there is vision."

The place's original name was "Shalem," or wholeness. Our forefather Abraham renamed it "*Yireh*," vision. For thousands of years since that day, the name of that sacred place has combined both qualities: *Yerushalayim*, a vision of wholeness.

Today, the shofar reminds us that even when feeling despair, there are rams caught in the thicket, angels calling us to look for a better way forward. We can hear its eternal message: *od lo avda tikvateinu*. Never abandon hope.

This year, may we hear the shofar reminding us: don't give in to the darkness. Lift your eyes, open your ears. Search with all your might. Use all of your vision to seek out a better future for your children and their children and their children. May we honor all the generations back to Abraham and Sarah who brought us to this day, by tuning our ears to the sound for which each of us yearns -- the voice of hope.