

Rosh Hashanah 5782 - Rabbi Bryan Wexler
A Letter to My Children: My HOPE

One of my most cherished times of the day is bedtime with my five year old twins, Meyer and Gavi. We have a routine. They each get to pick a book to read, then we get in bed and sing some songs, the last of which is the Shema. Intermittently we reflect on the past day and discuss what we are looking forward to tomorrow. I'll never forget a bedtime conversation that we had one night this past Summer. Gavi whispered to me: "Daddy, I'm scared." "What are you scared of sweetheart?" "I'm scared that a monster is going to come and hurt me." "Monsters aren't real Gavi. There are no such things. You don't need to be scared of anything." But then she continued: "What about germs? I'm scared of the germs." Throughout the Pandemic, around the kids, Becca and I have often referred to COVID-19 as "germs," explaining to them that there are a lot of germs in the world right now. Meyer then chimed in: "Daddy do you remember what it was like without germs?" I froze. I held back tears. And rather than give an answer, I simply said: "It's getting late, let's sing the Shema."

I have regretted not answering Meyer and Gavi's questions ever since. In fact, I have been thinking about their fears and their questions for almost two months now. I feel that I need to respond. I owe them a better answer. In fact, it is so important to me that I get this right, that I spent some time talking to an expert, Dr. Rebecca Schrag Hershebrg, a clinical psychologist who specializes in early childhood social-emotional development and mental health. With her help, I finally felt ready to respond. So I wrote a letter, a letter to my children; and I want to share it with you today because I think we can all work together to find the language to make sense of our world for our children, our grandchildren, and for ourselves.

Dear Meyer and Gavi,

First let me tell you that I am proud of you and I love you. Just as my Mom always told me and I tell you each and every day: I love you to the moon and back and I am SO proud of the young kids you have become. Gavi, you said you are afraid, and naming your feeling is brave. Sometimes parents make mistakes, and I made one when I told you that “you don’t need to be afraid....that there is nothing to be afraid of.” What I should have said and what I want you to know now is that your feelings are real. It’s okay to be afraid. In fact, there are some things that I’m scared of too. Sometimes I get scared when people are mean and when they don’t think of others. Sometimes I get scared when people get sick. I’m worried about the germs too. I’m also scared that some people are feeling really lonely right now. Let me pause the letter here.

Friends, there are more things that worry me, things I wanted to share in the letter, but Meyer and Gavi are too young and I don’t really know how to say it to them. But let me tell you. I’m worried that we live in a world troubled by natural disasters and concerned about climate change; a world plagued by severe racial and economic divides as well as bitter political strife and baseless hatred. I worry that our children are growing up in a world of terrorist attacks, hate marches, and senseless school shootings. If I could assure Meyer and Gavi that they will never be the target of a bully, that they will never bear the brunt of anti-Semitism, I absolutely would. If I could promise them that we will soon return to a sense of normal, emerging out of this pandemic healthy and safe, I would. If I could make this world all that they deserve, please know that I would. But, I can’t. And that breaks my heart.

Back to the letter: Meyer and Gavi, Rosh Hashana is special time when we say we are sorry. So today, please know that I’m sorry. I’m sorry that there is so much ugliness in our world. I’m sorry there are so many people that can’t get along and that don’t care about one another. I’m sorry there are so many people who make bad choices, choices that are selfish and

not kind. I'm also sorry for all that you have missed because of the germs: precious time with your grandparents and other family and friends. I'm sorry for your missed playdates. Meyer, I'm sorry you couldn't play baseball with the other kids. And Gavi, I'm sorry you couldn't do dance with your friends. I'm sorry that we haven't gone to your favorite restaurant in more than 18 months, and I'm sorry that whenever we go to the playground you have to be worried about when you need to put on your mask. Meyer and Gavi, I'm sorry that you gave up SO much last year, but I'm also so proud of you for helping to keep us adults safe. And I wish that I could be proud of all adults for wearing masks and getting vaccinated to keep you safe now too, but I can't, because not everyone who could did. And that makes me really sad.

And finally, I'm sorry for thinking for so long that my job as a parent was to reassure you that everything is okay. No, my job is to help you sit with your feelings and understand that feelings themselves aren't scary. We are having lots of BIG emotions right now. Your feelings are real. You told me that you are feeling scared, and I get that, because I am too. We are living in a time, you see, when a lot of people are afraid. It doesn't matter if they're little like you or big like me. We all get scared. It's okay to be afraid. Don't run away from the feeling. It's telling you something important about what's happening around you and inside of you. But please know that I am always here with you when you have feelings, whatever they are, even if they are scary. I also want you to know and see that there is a lot of good in the world. There are a lot grown-ups in charge who are trying to make the world less scary. Like a very important person in my life, Mr. Rogers taught me—we should always look for the helpers. There are many people that want to help us, that want to help you. Mommy and I always try to be helpers. And we know that you will be helpers too—helping people feel safe and a little less scared by being kind and loving.

In so many ways, Meyer and Gavi, it has been a tough year. We thought the germs were finally going away. But they didn't yet. People are still getting sick. Today, I'm thinking about a book, written by Judith Viorst, called: Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. It tells the story of a little boy named Alexander who has a REALLY BAD day. For him it feels like the worst day ever. Nothing goes right and that makes him both really mad and really sad. So sad that he announces that he wants to run far away to Australia, leaving his bad day behind. But the book ends with these words: **“It has been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My Mom says that some days are like that. Even in Australia.”** It is surprising that book ends this way. Shouldn't the author have written that Alexander woke up the next morning and it was a beautiful, awesome, great new day?! No. The message of the book is really important. It tells us that we will have many bad days and while we hope that tomorrow will be better, there is no guarantee. But here is the most important part: **We will get through the bad days. We will get through them together. How do we get through them? It's a four letter word: H.O.P.E...HOPE.**

Let me pause the letter again, because it was here that I paused in my writing to think about hope. Hope is much deeper than “they all lived happily ever after.” To hope is to conceive of things turning out different from how they might, to believe in the possibility of a positive outcome, often in the absence of any evidence. Hope sometimes seems like an irrational emotion, a chutzpadik impulse that others may say is ill advised or even naïve. There is not always a scientific or historical reason to believe that tomorrow could be better than today. In fact, things sometimes do get worse before they get better. A reality that we can certainly understand now in the midst of both the pandemic and the political and social unrest in our country. Having hope requires that we take the long view. To be clear, having hope does not

mean denying our current existence but rather defying it. Hope forces us to squarely face the facts of life and then see something beyond them. Living with hope means both dwelling in the world that is and at the same time aspiring to the world as it might yet be.

Tikvah, the Hebrew word for hope, originates in an unusual story from the Book of Joshua. A Canaanite woman named Rahab courageously protects two Israeli scouts from Canaanite attack. As a reward, the scouts promise that when the Israelite army invades Canaan, they will return the favor, and Rahab and her family will be protected. In order to protect her, they offer her a scarlet tikvah, a scarlet thread, to hang from her window. This thread becomes Rahab's only guarantee that her household will be spared by the Israelites. It was literally her tikvah, her only hope.

Hope is that thread that we continue to hold onto during the darkest moments in our own lives, and in our world. It is the common thread that we, as a Jewish people hold onto ever so tightly when nothing is guaranteed. The Jewish people have held onto hope since the beginning of time. Somehow, from deep within, we have held on tight and found the courage to get up and move forward. We continue to have hope. Because that is what Jews do. Our national anthem, Hatikvah, celebrates the realization of one of our greatest hopes, Israel. And it also represents the hope that we continue to have in our hearts. Some days are more difficult than others. Some days are simply terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. And yet, our tradition teaches that even in the most challenging of times, we must hold tight to Tikvah, hope, even if it feels like it is dangling by a thread. Perhaps this is why we add Psalm 27 to our daily prayers from the beginning of the month of Elul all the way through the holiday of Sukkot. Psalm 27 begins by expressing our fears and concerns, but then it ends with the words *kaveih el AdoShem*- place your hope in God. *Kaveih*—there is that word *tikvah* again. The psalm moves us from fear to

hope, mirroring the journey of these High Holy Days. *Tikvah*. Our job is to hold onto hope; because that is what we have always done. In fact, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (z”l), the former Chief rabbi of the UK, went even further, asserting that in a sense “Jews invented hope,” And then he continued: “The Greeks gave the world the concept of tragedy. Jews gave it the idea of hope... To be a Jew, is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair.

Back to the letter. Meyer and Gavi, do you remember learning about the moon last year at school? Do you remember how excited you were to teach Mommy and me all that you had learned about the moon and its cycles? I love the moon too. It is a symbol of hope in the darkest of times. And we Jews are moon people. In this way, it makes sense that the Jewish calendar is based on the cycle of the moon. But, there is a problem with seeing the moon as a symbol of hope. The moon is not always visible. Sometimes it is only partly visible, and in the case of the beginning of each Hebrew month, we see no moon at all. Again let me pause the letter here and ask you: did you know that today, Rosh Hashana, is the only Jewish holiday that occurs on Rosh Hodesh, the new moon? Tonight, there will be no moon to see in the sky. Rosh Hashana is literally our darkest Jewish holiday. And yet, to begin the holiday in the evening we proclaimed in our prayers the last two nights: “*Tiku va’chodesh shofar, ba’keseh l’yon chagainu*”, “Blow the shofar when the moon is covered”. When the moon is covered, when we cannot see even a little sliver of light, we are commanded to blast the shofar, a symbol of hope — hope even in the darkest of times. Together the shofar and the moon help to remind us of an important lesson. Even when no light is visible at all, even in the deepest darkness, our hearts trust and remember that the light will shine once again. Maybe even tomorrow. And—though it seems impossible to imagine today—the light will even eventually reemerge in its fullness.

Back to the letter: Meyer and Gavi, the moon teaches us to hold onto hope, but there are still so many challenges in the world. There is so much in our world that can break our hearts. I wish I could protect you from getting your hearts broken, but that is not the way the world works. I abruptly stopped writing the letter. I knew I couldn't end the letter on that note, but I couldn't seem to find the right words. So I returned to thinking about Rosh Hashanah, and in particular, the liturgy. Maybe a prayer would help me find the words. One of the main prayers of today is the Unetaneh Tokef. In the Unetaneh Tokef, we concede that terrible things will happen in life. We will have some terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days, and sometimes even worse. There is much in life that is out of our control, but there is also much that we can control. The Unetaneh Tokef tells us to focus on three essential words: teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah. Teshuva means turning. It is recognizing that we can grow, we can change, we can inspire. Sure, life is happening all around us and to us, but we can still be agents of change. We don't have to accept the world as it is with all of its flaws. Tefillah refers to our capacity for prayer, our capacity to open our hearts, our capacity to be open to a relationship with God. There's so much out of our control, but do you know what we can control? We can control how many times we say I love you. We can control how many times we say thank you. Tefillah means living with love and gratitude. And finally, tzedakah, means being generous with our time, our energy, our pockets, our hearts. What we can control is how we respond to the events around us. When our hearts break after an anti-Semitic incident, we educate and organize. When a building collapses in Florida or homes burn down in California wildfires, we donate. When we realize that the Pandemic is not over and we must protect not only ourselves but others, we get vaccinated and we keep wearing masks. When we see that someone is depressed or afraid, we reach out and tell them that they are not alone. *Teshuvah. Tefillah. Tzedakah.* The Unetaneh

Tokef is not telling us what will keep us safe, but rather, how we should respond as Jews. The Jewish response is do teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah, for when we do so, we demonstrate both the resilience that Rabbi Peltz taught about yesterday, and we hold strong to hope. We become the hope, and we live with hope in our hearts.

I was beginning to find the words to end my letter. And then I found a sermon written by a colleague of mine Rabbi Sharon Brous, the Rabbi of Ikkar in LA. In the sermon, she tells a story about her friend, Reverend Otis Moss. She explained that years ago, he and his church were under attack. They were receiving hundreds of hate-filled threats every week. Reverend Moss was a new preacher and a young father, and the stress was acute. Listen to what he wrote: One night I was half asleep and heard a noise in the house. My wife, Monica, punched me and said, “You go check that out.” So I did. Like a good preacher I grabbed my rod and staff to comfort me. I went walking through the house with my rod and staff that was made in Louisville with the name Slugger on it. I looked downstairs, and then I heard the noise again. I... peeked in my daughter’s room. And there was my daughter Makayla dancing in the darkness—just spinning around, saying, “Look at me, Daddy.” I said, “Makayla, you need to go to bed. It is 3 a.m. You need to go to bed.” But she said, “No, look at me, Daddy. Look at me.” And she was spinning, barrettes going back and forth, pigtails going back and forth.

I was getting huffy and puffy wanting her to go to bed, but then God spoke to me. “Look at your daughter! She’s dancing in the dark. The darkness is all around her but it is not in her!” Reverend Moss concluded with these words: “Makayla reminded me that weeping may endure for a night, **but if you dance long enough joy will come in the morning.** It is the job of preachers (and clergy)... to [send] this word to us in the hardest of times: do not let the darkness find its way in you.”

Do not let the darkness finds its way in you...Hope doesn't mean that everything is okay. Not everything is today. But hope means believing that there will be a tomorrow. That if we dance long enough, joy will come in the morning. Despite all of our struggles and shortcomings, all of the things that have made us feel scared, sad, or alone this past year, we can't let the darkness find its ways inside us. We must hold onto hope. What gives you hope? I find hope in the love of family and friends. I find hope in the resilience of our TBS community. I find hope in our frontline workers—health care professionals, teachers, supermarket cashiers, and the like who have taught us that not all heroes wear capes. I find hope in those fighting for equal rights, justice, and the dignity of all people. I find hope in the Torah, in our liturgy, and in our tradition. I find hope both in God and in science. I find hope in those who continue to put their best foot forward every day, who strive to bring more Godliness to our world, and who simply continue to dance. If you dance long enough, joy will come in the morning. I now knew how I wanted to end the letter, so back to the letter, one last time.

Meyer and Gavi, during this Pandemic, with lots of extra time together at home, we have had more spontaneous dance parties than I can count. I have the words “Alexa play Disney music seared in my mind.” But what I have not told you before, I guess because I didn’t even fully realize it until now, is that each of those dance parties were so much more for me. **They were also hope parties. Because the greatest hope that I find in the world, is in the two of you.** You give me hope when you smile, when you laugh, and when you fall down but then get up again. You give me hope when you comfort, hug, kiss, and love. You give me hope when you realize that you too can be a hero in the world. Not by being the smartest or the wealthiest, or the best. But simply by being you and by letting your heart do the talking. You give me so much hope each and every day.

But Meyer and Gavi, I need to tell you a secret. I'm guessing you already know this since you are well on your way to being superheroes. The secret is, I'm not just writing this letter to you today. I'm writing and now I'm talking to children; all children. Children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and students- they are our hope. Hope for the future and also hope for the present.

One more secret: Walt Disney once said: "adults are only kids grown up." Today, this letter I am writing to you is for everybody. It's for ALL OF YOU. Meyer and Gavi, it may have taken a couple of months, but I hope I have now answered your questions more appropriately. I hope you will keep this letter and read it whenever you are feeling afraid. And I hope it will help you feel better. I hope when you read this letter, today and in the future it will help you to understand that while we can't make our fears go away, we can be there for each other. We can help each other through difficult times. And we can help each other live with hope through our presence, our support, our love, and many, many spontaneous dance parties. Thank you for being my source of hope each and every day. May you always hold tight to hope and may you always strive to be the source of hope for others.

And then I ended my letter by writing: I love you with all my heart, love Daddy. I truly hope my kids will keep the letter. But what I want to say to all of you-- all of the kids grown up-- both in the sanctuary and joining us on the livestream this morning, is the following: each and every one of you, through your kindness, your presence, and your love, brings me hope. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. And I also ask: can you find hope today? Can you find hope in the love of family and friends? Can you find hope in our children? Can you find hope in God? Can you find hope even in those who you disagree with? Most of all, can you find hope within yourselves? There will be days that will be terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. But

what about tomorrow? If you dance long enough, joy will come in the morning. Yes, hope may sometimes feel like it's hanging from a thread, but not when it lives in our hearts. May hope always live in our hearts.

Friends, as you leave today, I invite you to take a card that we made for each of you. It's a card that invites you to reflect on your hopes for the year 5782 (Hold up card). If you are here in the sanctuary, please pick up a card before leaving the building. For those at home, you can find the card on our High Holiday TBSConnects site, the website you are using to join us for services today. I hope you will download the card and print it out. When it gets dark tonight and the holiday ends, even though there will be no moon to be found in the sky, I want to invite everyone to write about what gives you hope. What is your hope for yourself and for your loved ones in this new year of 5782? What is the hope that lives in your heart? I would love to hear what you write. Perhaps we can set up a time in the coming weeks to sit in our TBS tent in the Parking lot and discuss over a cup of coffee what you wrote. But either way, anytime you are having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day this year, take out the card and read it. Keep it in your pocket, or on your desk, or in your siddur, and use it to remind yourself of your *Tikvah*. Your hope. Write about hope tonight as you search for the moon, and as you do so, know that I will be tucking Meyer and Gavi into bed and will be telling them what my mother has told me every day of my life: "I love you to the moon and back."