

Rosh Hashanah, Day 1 2021/5782, The Power of Hope

What lessons do we remember from elementary school?

I before E except after C.

Writing letters in block and cursive, or in more recent years, making a presentation on Google slides.

There is a lesson from Mrs. Nielsen, my fifth-grade science teacher that's stayed with me over the years, a lesson that does not so much speak to me about science but more about our faith and confronting a New Year that is, unfortunately, feeling like an extension of the previous 18 months rather than a whole new world and a broader return to life as we knew it.

This lesson is called the law of conservation of energy, which explains the energy within a system cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be converted from one form to another, unless energy gets added from the outside.

When we come to this moment, the beginning of a new year in the Jewish spiritual calendar, especially this year, as energized and enthusiastic as I am about being here with you and joyfully welcoming the New Year with an open mind and heart, I suspect I'm not the only one feeling some heaviness of spirit and fatigue at the lingering and growing Coronavirus numbers, here, in Israel, and elsewhere in the world.

We walk around at times with weariness and dread. For example, when I was at the bus stop with the other bus stop families on the first morning of school, after the cheer that went up after the kids boarded the bus, everyone was saying how they hoped schools will stay open. Again, concern, and a gray cloud over an otherwise hopeful moment.

As we wait for vaccines for our youngest community members, and for vaccines to get to people all over the world, we need to find an outside source of energy to infuse us with a fresh sense of hopefulness, purpose, and meaning as we experience a time that is chaotic not only because of the virus but because along with it

we've witnessed social, political, environmental upheavals of a variety and intensity, both here and abroad, that feel unprecedented, complicated and transcendent.

And so, let's make all our 5th grade science teachers proud today, and apply the law of conservation of energy to open up for us a new way of experiencing Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the New Year.

It's at this time of year our tradition teaches us that the outside energy we're looking for is available, and happily for us it is available to us all at no out-of-pocket cost, and it is zero emissions, zero negative emissions.

We heard this words in today's Haftarah – *dirshu Ado-nai be-hi-matz-oh*, k-ra-u-hu bih-yoto karov – Search out God where the Holy One can be found, call to God when God is near.

Our tradition teaches us that these ten days, Rosh Hashanah, the days in between, and Yom Kippur are the days when God is especially close.

The Baal Shem Tov encourages us to stay positive though about the potential for God's energy to infuse us with new strength this time of year.

He teaches us the Rabbis of the Talmud (Yevamot 105a) tell us God is close by during these days but for an unexpected reason.

Looking back on our history we might have thought God was always close to us during the days the Temples stood in Jerusalem, those holy places to where all the people turned their hearts, where the Ark of the Covenant and the priests pronounced the mysterious Name of God once per year and all the people who could made pilgrimage.

He argues – to the contrary - it is easier now, in the days *after* the Temples, for our prayers to be answered and for us to experience the ru-ah ha'Kodesh, the Divine spirit. Why is that? He says when a monarch is in the palace, it's much more difficult to approach that person than when the King or Queen is out there on the road, where anyone can approach him or her.

That's us, we're the ones out on the metaphorical road.

So how, under these circumstances, do we approach God and tap into the spiritual energy we need?

We all have access to this energy whatever the nature of our belief or questions of faith.

What's most important to enable us to access this energy is to nurture hope in ourselves -- not a smarmy, Hallmark-holiday special type hope, but an earnest, durable feeling inside that what we do, however minimal it may feel, however insignificant we may feel, makes a difference. If we can do that, then our hearts will be open and our souls receptive.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn, who was a prisoner in Auschwitz, tells the story of hope in the unlikeliest of places. Another inmate who approached him on a cold December evening in the camp to say tonight is the first night of Chanukkah. His father made a little menorah out of scrap metal, he used threads from his uniform for wicks, and for oil, a little butter he somehow got from a guard. This was a huge risk, and Gryn protested at the waste of precious calories. Wouldn't it be better to share the butter on a crust of bread than burn it? His father said, "Hugo, both you and I know a person can live a very long time without food. But Hugo, I tell you, a person cannot live a single day without hope. This is the fire of hope. Never let it go out. Not here. Not anywhere. Remember that, Hugo. (R. Kenneth Cohen in *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*, 247-248)

Real hope restores life. The prophet Ezekiel tells the compelling story of the valley of dried bones he sees in a vision, with the voice of the people from this place saying "Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, we're doomed."

Rabbi Meir Levush reads these words, our hope is gone, and reminds us that hope is the *kusta de'hayuta*, the stuff of life, it is the energy source that in our mystical tradition is a part of the soul that stays active while we sleep enabling us to wake up in the morning. There it is, definitively, hope as a source of power!

On a national scale, it is the energy source that leads our ancestors from slavery to freedom, and gives us the wherewithal to do all the mitzvot necessary to raise up our world, in our time, to justice, to inclusion, to faith in each other, our tradition, and faith in the Source of Creation itself.

I'm arguing that hope can be a real motivational force in our lives, a force that ties directly to the latent potential in the air and water of these holy days as expressed in the prophecy of Isaiah. Even so, my gut tells me for many of us hope may be a rare commodity. If we've experienced so many setbacks that our lives are at a stand-still, if our health is compromised and we can't fully realize our goals, if we're in a dark place emotionally or in our relationships, if a relative or friend is suffering, or has succumbed to Covid 19, the most persuasive message of hope may sound at best empty, and at worst insulting.

Still, allow me to share an adapted version of a message from Rabbi Naomi Levy, that I pray can be helpful for all of us in this moment. Here's the message:

It's so much easier to be hopeful in life's highs...easier for the Children of Israel to find hope in the Exodus, in the face of miracles, of seas parting, than it was to find hope in the schlep, in the journey out of Egypt through the desert in the heat without shade or food.

But that's our challenge, to find hope in each day.

It's so much easier to find hope in the ideal of God, the loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God of the universe who neither slumbers nor sleeps, than it is to find hope in a God who is silent in the face of suffering and death and disease and terror and war and genocide and natural disaster.

But that's our challenge, to find hope and faith in this broken, breath-taking world. (From [Hope Will Find You](#))

Let's be as courageous as we can be for this challenge. To do so in this New Year we will have to challenge ourselves. For those who may have watched the TV show Seinfeld, you may recall the character George Costanza at one of his lowest moments, when he tells his friends about how every instinct and decision he's ever made were wrong and made his life worse. And so his friends urge him then to just do the opposite. And when he does, to his surprise, his life begins to change, for the better. This bit does not mean we should also do the opposite, but it does mean that teshuvah, reflecting, changing direction, and remaking the world in a way that is full of hope, requires courage, scrappiness, and a willingness to flirt with failure.

We will need to get up to act at times we feel full of fear or we're on the fence, and we'll need to move when we'd rather sit still, and reach out to God in prayer when we'd prefer not to even speak.

The energy we need is outside our system – for all of us today here and joining us from home, without touching, we're going to need to virtually join hands, and then we'll see that although the God to whom we

pray, who is the Source of Hope, is invisible, and silent, the people we see around us are very real and in need of hope as much as we are. If you are able to feel this hope in the New Year, share it, let it spread like electricity until we all feel it, in our own capacity.

And then let's all thank our 5th grade science teachers for the lessons in the fundamentals of science that continue to help us open our eyes and hearts and to not only welcome in a New Year, but create a year that is altogether new, renewed, and re-energized for us, for Israel, and for the world. Amen.