

Choosing Hope
Rosh Hashanah Day I 5783 (2022)
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This summer my family was fortunate to travel to Israel for a summer vacation. It's been four years since we've last been to Israel. Four years since I've last seen my grandmother. Three years since we've last seen my sister and her family.

We were looking forward to some down time. Time away from the constant push and pull of leadership under the strains of Covid. Time for our children to connect with the home of our people. And just, time away.

Our first week in Israel was magical and then Covid decided to show up as well.

At an outdoor café, at about 10 am in the morning, one of our – very active – children, fell asleep in their chair. Frayda and I looked at each other knowingly – Covid is here. Two days later I tested positive as well. A day after that, another child. And a day after that, one other.

Our family split up into two separate homes. Frayda, who never got sick, headed the non-Covid household, which ultimately ended up having only one child in it. I ran the Covid home, or as I like to call it, Camp Covid, which besides myself included three of our children.

In truth, I spent the first day of being sick feeling pretty despondent. How could this happen to me? How could this happen to us? I've had some pretty direct conversations with God that day, but to no avail.

At the end of that very long day one thing became very clear to me. I can spend half of our vacation in Israel feeling bad for myself or I can make a decision that no matter what, this vacation will still be great. Covid might make me feel tired – which it did – or give me migraines – which it did in spades, but...but! Covid will not take away my choice to connect with my children while we're stuck in an apartment in Israel. This is going to be great. This is going to be fun. And in truth, thank God, it mostly was.

By the time child number two joined Camp Covid, they waked through the apartment door and said: "I'm here for the Covid party!" And I felt pretty accomplished.

As soon as our quarantine was done, our family went into hyperdrive. We spent the remaining days in Israel touring at 110% capacity. Kotel at 8 am, check. Ben Yehudah Street at 11 am, check. *Shuk* at 12 pm, check. Favorite Jerusalem restaurant at 2 pm, check. I think you get where I'm going with this.

This experience has made me think a lot about the choices we make, about the perspective we choose to deepen and cultivate, and the lens through which we opt to look at the world and our lives.

This choice – specifically our ability to choose hope, optimism, and faith – seems especially apt at this time. During the past two and a half years, time and time again, we've chosen vigilance as our primary mode of being, and for good reason most of the time. Sadly, when vigilance goes unchecked for too long, it can also turn into a debilitating force, manifesting as anxiety, pessimism, and hopelessness. So with that in mind, as we set our intentions for this coming new year, I'd like us to focus on this pertinent issue – choosing faith, hope, and optimism.

Chabad Hassidim often share this tale:

"The story is told of a follower of R. Menachem Mendel, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, the 'Tzemach Tzedek,' whose son was seriously ill. He was advised to travel to the Tzemach Tzedek to ask for a blessing. With a heavy heart, he made the difficult trek to the rebbe.

In response to his request for a blessing, the Tzemach Tzedek pronounced five Yiddish words, which have been quoted by the Chabad Rebbes ever since: *'Tracht gut vet zein gut – Think good and it will be good.'*

The Chasid took these words to heart, and during the entire homeward journey he strove to strengthen his trust in God and visualize a good outcome [...]. When he returned home, he was shocked to see his son completely healed and back to his normal self" (Mendel Kalmenson, *Positivity Bias*, pp. 156-157).

At first glance, *"Tracht gut vet zein gut – Think good and it will be good"* may seem like magical thinking to some of us. And yet, Brené Brown, who is described by Time magazine as "America's reigning expert on feelings," offers a definition of hope that closely resonates with this one.

Brené Brown writes: "Hope is not an emotion; it's a way of thinking or a cognitive process. Emotions play a supporting role, but hope is really a thought process made up of [...] a trilogy of goals, pathways, and agency. In very simple terms, hope happens when:

We have the ability to set realistic goals (I know where I want to go). We are able to figure out how to achieve those goals, including the ability to stay flexible and develop alternative routes (I know how to get there, I'm persistent, and I can tolerate disappointment and try again). We believe in ourselves (I can do this!)."

Brené Brown also adds another important insight: "Hope is a function of struggle" and "hope is learned" (Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*).

There is clearly a delicate balance between setting realistic goals, staying flexible, developing alternative routes, and believing in ourselves – and in our context, also believing in God. Rav Froman z"l, a leading post-modern religious Zionist rebbe, once explained: "Faith can be freedom from subjugation to facts, without being blind toward reality, and the voice of God contained therein. This distinction is as slim as a strand of hair" (Rav Menachem Froman, *Hassidim Laugh About This*, translated by Levi Morrow, #84).

Toward the end of his life, R. Froman literally embodied this sort of faith after getting diagnosed with terminal cancer. His children shared this memory: "Toward the end of his life, after his illness was discovered. The doctors said to him that it was at an advanced stage, and he did not have a lot of time left. He immediately began to prepare himself for death. He studied and studied about death from the Zohar and other books. Many people around him, from his family and his students, tried to comfort him, so that he would believe that he might escape this and be saved, rather than despairing. He would say, 'For God, anything is possible,' and then kept learning about and focusing on death.

We saw that, on the one hand, he had a piercing clarity about the facts, in all their harshness, and a deep acceptance of reality. On the other hand, this gaze did not render him despairing or pessimistic. On the contrary, he almost celebrated his illness. He studied, with depth and curiosity, what God was speaking to him from the pains of his body. You could sense how the sense that "these are the facts" did not subtract from the sense that 'For God, anything is possible.' [...]

[Rav Froman] would often repeat a joke he heard from his father, about a Gur Hasid who was dying, and when he began to expire, his friend bent down and whispered to him, 'Lazer, say *Shehekiyanu*, it's the first time you're dying!'" (Rav Menachem Froman, *Hassidim Laugh About This*, translated by Levi Morrow, #85).

Thankfully, the vast majority of us aren't in the position of facing a terminal disease. Yet during these days of judgment, and perhaps after the trauma of the past two and a half years, we recognize that the world, and yes, even our own lives, hang in the balance. Choosing hope, as a way of thinking or a cognitive process, means that we can bless *Shehekiyanu* no matter what comes our way. No matter

what comes our way, as long as we remain alive, we will set new goals, we will continue to seek new pathways, and we will ground ourselves in our own agency.

As noted earlier, Brené Brown also maintains that “hope is a function of struggle.” She explains that “we develop hope not during the easy or comfortable times, but through adversity and discomfort.” Furthermore, she urges us to look at our role models. She writes: “It’s also important to note that hope is learned. [...] Children most often learn the habit of hope from their parents. To learn hopefulness, children need relationships that are characterized by boundaries, consistency, and support. Children with high levels of hopefulness have experience with adversity. They’ve been given the opportunity to struggle, and in doing that they learn how to believe in themselves and their ability” (Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*).

For some of us, our own parents, and even our grandparents, offer models to emulate. Sometimes however that is not really the case. Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin invites us to look up to Abraham and Sarah and recall the very birth of our nation.

He notes:

אין ליהודי להתייאש משום דבר

“A Jew must never despair.”

וכל בנין אומה הישראלית היה אחר היאוש הגמור דאברהם ושרה זקנים ומי מלל לאברהם הניקה וגו' (בראשית כ"א ז')

“The Jewish nation was born as Sarah and Abraham were on the brink of despair, reaching old age, who would have believed they would be blessed with the birth of a child?”

Rav Tzadok further notes that our entire belief in the ultimate redemption of the world rests on this single occurrence:

וכן הישועה דלעתיד נאמר (ישעיה נ"ג א') מי האמין לשמועתינו וגו', ...ועל כן אמר (ישעיה נ"א ב') הביטו אל אברהם אביכם ואל שרה תחוללכם, דגם התחלת בנינכם היה כן אחר היאוש

“Should anyone question: How will our ultimate redemption come about? How can we even believe in this? Let them look unto Abraham and Sarah who gave birth to all of you, for the very founding of your nation took place on the brink of despair” (Rav Tzadok of Lublin, *Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy*, # 16 – ז"ט).

It is certainly remarkable to consider the words of Rav Tzadok Hakohen alongside the words of Israel's anthem, proclaiming “*Od lo avdah tikvateinu* – We have never lost our hope!” The anthem claims that our hope is 2000 years old. Rav Tzadok however argues that our hope is much older than that. Our hope goes back to our original forefather and foremother and the birth of Isaac.

In truth, the last two years and a half created many agents of hope. We don't need to look all the way back to our ancient ancestors, just look around you. Individuals in our community chose hope over despair on a daily basis. If you find yourself hitting a wall, lean on us. Lean on them. You are not alone.

Hope is in our history. Hope is in our midst. Hope is a choice we make as a community.

At a recent parent orientation for Gan Shalom, CBI's preschool director, Emma Schnur, told the parents: “I think it's going to be a hopeful year.” Her words were met with a profound sense of agreement, or perhaps a deep sense of longing, among the parent community.

To me, she sounded like a Hassidic rebbe, like the Tzemach Tzedek who pronounced: “*Tracht gut vet zein gut* – Think good and it will be good.”

For the sake of our community's children – I think it's going to be a hopeful year.

For the sake of each one of us here – I think it's going to be a hopeful year.

For the sake of Israel and the for the sake of the world – I think it's going to be a hopeful year.

“Tracht gut vet zein gut – Think good and it will be good.”

Think good and it will be good.