Threads of Hope: Weaving a Future Beyond Despair

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I recently stood with my father and one of my sons at the end of the Amidah. When the prayer leader chanted the words *Baruch atah Hashem, oseh hashalom*—"Blessed are You, Lord, who makes peace"—my father leaned down to my son and whispered, with tears in his eyes, "And yet, we have no peace."

Later, when I asked my father if I could share this story publicly, he teared up again and said, "Yes, because it pains me to death that there is no peace."

Our words and prayers fail us. Their meanings have shifted. They weigh differently. They no longer sound the same.

The Talmud records how, after the destruction of the Temple, there were several verses which a number of our rabbis could not encounter without crying:

"When Rabbi Ami reached this verse in Lamentations (3:29), he cried: 'Let him put his mouth in the dust, perhaps there may be hope'. אולי יש תקוה Rabbi Ami said: A sinner suffers through all this punishment—even eating dust!— and only perhaps there may be hope?"

"When Rabbi Ami reached this verse from Zephaniah (2:3), he cried: 'Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you shall be hidden on the day of the Lord's anger'.
בקשו צדק בקשו ענוה אולי תסתרו ביום אף ה',
אמר: כולי האי - ואולי?
He said: All of this is expected of each individual, and only perhaps God's anger may be hidden?"

"When Rabbi Asi reached this verse from Amos (5:15), he cried: 'Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish justice in the gate; perhaps the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious'. He said: All of this, and only perhaps?" (Chagigah 4b – 5b.)

כולי האי ואולי – all of this, and only perhaps?
אולי יש תקוה – And only perhaps there may be hope?

How do we find hope in hopeless times?

Let me begin by suggesting that, at times, it is critical to delve more fully into our sense of despair. Simply put, sometimes despair itself clears the path toward hope.

Uri Zvi Greenberg, one of the most influential and controversial Hebrew poets of the 20th century, put it this way: "*A broken spirit, having exhausted every line and journeyed all the way past despair, can begin life anew. For beyond despair there is no more despair—only untouched ground, lying at the feet of some mysterious tomorrow, awaiting the plowman"* (Uri Zvi Greenberg, "B. On the Massacre," in *Anacreon on the Demon of Sorrow*, *Uri Zvi Greenberg: Collected Works*, vol. I, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 115.)

Avi Sagi, an Israeli philosopher and scholar of Jewish thought, explains that while "there is, of course, a kind of despair that weakens us, that makes us surrender to compromise, laziness, rationalization, or shallow pleasures. […] There is also a different kind of despair—creative, generative despair—that compels a person to act. […] Despair can also turn a person back toward himself and toward others. Despair can restore a person's sense of responsibility for himself and for others" (Avi Sagi, *Between Realistic Hope and Metaphysical Hope – The Thought of Ramḥal and Its Critique*, September 27, 2024.)

In recent months, I have been thinking a lot about despair in this more constructive way—asking myself to use my own sense of despair to challenge old ways of thinking, to push me to think outside the box, to flex my imagination, and not get bogged down by the limits of my own perspective.

Rebbi Nachman has a powerful idea: that one must always repent for their repentance. He calls it *teshuvah al hateshuvah*. He explains that, inevitably, at some point a person must come to realize that even their teshuva was tainted by the limits of their own sense of self or their own understanding of what teshuva is about. Constructive despair is somewhat related to this idea. In a sense, we must come to terms with the fact that our previous expectations were limited, and that we must now expand our thinking beyond what we thought previously.

In our homes, in our community, in national affairs, we might learn to think beyond the narrow terms that usually define our experience. Instead of measuring ourselves by the familiar but limiting categories of success and failure, power and weakness, war and peace, we might turn instead to imagination and hope, loving kindness and humility, gratitude and generosity—dispositions that invite us to envision a horizon wider, or perhaps deeper, than we can now perceive.

Our biblical sources offer another thread that brings us closer to understanding hope itself.

Adva Bumandil-HaCohen, an Israeli scholar and educator specializing in biblical texts and Jewish ritual, points out that the first appearances of the term *tikvah*, or hope, in the Bible are crucial to how we understand it.

She writes: *"The first two appearances of the word 'hope' in the Bible are in the story of Rahab the harlot. The spies instruct Rahab to tie the cord of hope in the window (Joshua 2:18),* *אֶת־תִּקְוַ֣ת חוּט֮ הַשָּׁנִי֒ הַזֶּ֗ה, so that they can identify her house and save her family. At first glance, the word hope in Rahab's story does not seem connected to the concept we know in the philosophical or psychological sense. Here, the 'cord of hope' has a literal, concrete meaning: a cord, a line. The spies are asking her to mark the house with a second cord—a bright red line—so that during the battle in Jericho, they will be able to recognize it."* (*Adva Bomandil HaCohen, On Hope and Its Source in the Bible. April 24, 2025.*)

I resonate deeply with the idea of hope as a rope. It invites us to see it in many different ways.

First, if the end of the rope is my starting point, then hope as a cord is an invitation to reach toward its distant end—a point that remains mysterious, yet whose existence is revealed simply by the rope in my hands.

Second, hope begins as a fragile strand. Over time, I can join another thread, and another, until the flimsy thread becomes a cord—strong, resilient, resistant.

Indeed, in Rahab's story, the rope also marks a location, signaling to others where to find her. Hope as a marker is therefore a call to join, to not stand alone, to cast our lot together.

This metaphor challenges us to identify even a single thread of hope and to invite others to weave their threads alongside ours. We are not called to have a full answer, or to display Hope with a capital "H." But a little hope, joined with the hopes of others, can grow into a strong cord—resilient against the forces of despair.

Hope as an act of weaving finds its opposite expression in the book of Job, where Job bemoans:

יָמַי קַלּוּ מִנִּי אָרֶג וַיִּכְלוּ בְאֶפֶס תִּקְוָה (איוב ז, ו)
My days have fled faster than a weaver's shuttle, and have come to an end without any hope."" ((Job 7:6

Job thinks of time as a relentless shuttle, moving fast, mechanically, and inevitably. In doing so, he forgets that hope itself is a thread and that the shuttle of hope can have a similar effect: it weaves different threads together, forming a resistant fabric that eventually, in its coherence, seems inevitable.

As a parent, I see my task as pointing my children toward the far end of that rope and then stepping back—trusting their imagination to follow it further than I can. Unburdened by disappointment or disillusionment that comes with age and experience, they may trace the line to places my own sight no longer reaches.

And here, in our communal setting, I recognize that my voice—however humble or meek—can be joined with others. We can weigh one another down, or we can lift each other up. Together we can weave our separate strands into something stronger—a shared cord of hope, reaching towards a horizon still unfolding.

Finally, we might consider hope as it appears in halakha, in Jewish practice and law.

In his essay *"Learning to Hope – A Halakhic Approach to History and Redemption,"* Rabbi David Hartman writes:

"Halakhic hope liberates action, for it provides a means by which to overcome the paralysis of dejection. Where our outlook is thoroughly hopeless, notions like progress and duty become meaningless, and our capacity to act is severely impaired. A prospect of attainment, on the other hand, helps generate the strength required to act. Expectancy that something new and good may occur often creates the very impetus necessary to implement one's goals." (*Hartman,*

David. From Defender to Critic: The Search for a New Jewish Self. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012, 128.)

We often experience this form of Halakhic hope in moments of profound loss. In scheduling a shiva, for example, we set aside time to grieve—but at the same time, we already schedule time to mark its end, on the seventh day. Even in mourning, we acknowledge the possibility of transitioning from acute trauma to grief and the possibility of some forms of comfort and consolation.

More broadly, while Halakha may not always answer *why*, it always insists on *what now*. It reminds us that there is always something to do, a duty to fulfill. When despair overwhelms us, Halakha turns us toward hope—not merely as a feeling, but through action, and more specifically, through the transformative power of mitzvot.

I know this to be true because I saw it in the lives and choices of my grandparents and my wife's grandparents, whose lives were cast into the darkness of despair, and yet, through their actions, they chose hope. I know this to be true because I was with you on Oct. 7, and Oct. 8, and Oct. 9, before I flew to Israel. Your mitzvot and our collective actions sustained me and gave me hope. And I believe a day will come when this too will be true for the children of Israel, and Gaza, and Syria, and Iran, and Ukraine, and sub-Saharan Africa—and for children here in America, and for the children of the world.

Hope, in this sense, is not a noun—it is a verb and an act. Where thought reaches its limits, where feelings threaten to immobilize us, action can guide us forward. Hartman emphasizes that Halakhic hope demands *"the courage to bear human responsibility, to persevere in partial solutions, and to accept the burden of living and building within contexts of uncertainty."* (*Hartman, David. From Defender to Critic: The Search for a New Jewish Self. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012, 128.*)

That image—living and building within uncertainty—resonates deeply with me.

Over the summer, Rabbi Tamir Granot, head of Orot Shaul Yeshiva and father of Capt. Amitay Granot, who was killed nearly two years ago on Israel's northern border, officiated the wedding of Roni, the woman once engaged to his now deceased son.

Roni had been engaged to Amitay during Sukkot, just days before the October 7 Hamas attack. Eight days into the war, they spoke by phone and agreed to marry during Amitay's first leave from duty. He was killed later that day.

Her new match or *shiduch*, an officer in an elite IDF unit, was arranged by Tzofia, the mother of Lt. Ivri Dickshtein, killed years earlier in Lebanon.

About two years earlier, at Amitay's funeral, Rabbi Granot urged Roni: *"Dear Ronileh, it will be slow, it will take a long time. Choose life, choose life, choose life."*

And now, almost two years later, Rav Tamir stood again with Roni, the young woman who had once been destined to marry his son—but this time under a chuppah. Rav Tamir, the bereaved

father turned officiant; Tzofia, the bereaved mother turned matchmaker; and Roni with her new groom, are each choosing life, embracing the challenge of living and building within contexts of uncertainty.

Their choice moves from despair toward imagination and hope.
They cast a thread of resistance, pointing to a distant, not-yet-seen end of the rope.
If you still feel hesitant, if you're holding on to doubt, Halakha bids you to hold on to that rope and take action. Choose *chesed*, choose lovingkindness, choose community. Choose life. Choose hope.
Let's pull together—over time, hope will guide us forward.