

Vayechi 5783
 Hoping, Seriously
 Rabbi Betsy Forester

It feels to me as if 2023 is slipping away with a faint whimper, leaving an unsettled sadness in its wake. In critical ways, we are not better than we were a year ago. There is a part of me that wants to skip over the next few years, because it looks to me like the problems we face will worsen before they get better. And yet, taking note of the change from '23 to '24 signals an opportunity for us to build a healthier path forward.

We have spoken a great deal together about finding meaning in the difficult circumstances we are facing, especially in the unique opportunities for learning that are exposed by the brokenness in which we find ourselves. Today I'd like to share two, related ideas about hope. I want to dedicate this teaching to my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Elie Holzer, who lives in Jerusalem. His Torah gives me respite in these challenging times and it is from him that I learned what I will share with you today. It revolves around the idea that hope requires both our rational, critical thinking, with open-eyed realism; and our ability to feel beyond our finite circumstances.

Toward the end of our *parashah*, the dying Yaacov imparts a parting testimony to each of sons. Somewhere in the middle, between sons, he throws in a line that seems like a non sequitur: “לישועתך קויתי הי” – “I hope for your salvation, God.” (Gen. 49:18). And then he turns to the next son.

It is not only that these words feel out of place. They also surprise us because until this moment we have gone 2 ½ *parashot* with nary a mention of God. There is something significant about God being nearly absent for so long, and then suddenly present.

The sage Rabbi Yitzchak tries to understand why Yaacov suddenly says, “לישועתך קויתי הי” – “I hope for your salvation, God.” He sees Yaacov as having held onto a belief that salvation would come during his lifetime, and now that he is about to die with his family still exiled, he asks himself, “was I foolish?” And then he answers out loud: “God, I hope for Your salvation,” as if to say, “I believe that there is more than this exile” (B'reishit Rabbah 98:15).

The late 20th century Hasidic master known as the Netivot Shalom* makes an intriguing assertion about hope based on this episode, which is: Hope, itself, brings salvation—and that is true whether we are deserving of a better reality or if we don't deserve to be, let's

say, forgiven and embraced. Just hoping for it makes us deserve it. Hope itself draws the future redemption closer in a way that transforms us.

Let's think about that. How does hope redeem us, if our life circumstances remain clouded? Is this like one of those kitchy signs we see out there that say "Believe" (I think, in reference to Jesus)--as if we could turn on a "believe" switch and be saved?"

Not exactly. The Netivot Shalom is talking here about a spiritual attitude that changes our way of being in the world. It is redemption by means of hoping in an open mode, transcending ourselves beyond our immediate circumstances. We see the reality, and we believe it does not have to be this way. As my classmate, Matt Banks, said: "Hope is an opening, and it's an opening that makes us vulnerable. When I think of hope, I think of the opposite being despair, but [the opposite of hope] also [about] closing down and refusing to think about any other possibility beyond what is right there. By opening ourselves up, and by making ourselves vulnerable, in that way, that's the way that we can connect to God and to each other..."

Our liturgy and scriptures offer many ideas that we deeply hope for—a peaceful life, health, sustenance, security, and so on. But the Netivot Shalom is talking about hope as an attitude of spiritual awakeness. We see so much harshness and bitterness in our world, and it can feel like we're trapped in it with no way out. But we are rarely helpless. We can keep our eyes open and our realistic minds on, while staying awake spiritually so as not to let the resonances of the promises we yearn for die within us—for if we lose the capacity to transcend our circumstances, we lose the sacred urge to do the work of learning and repair. Hope relies on that capacity for transcendence.

Our prayers and practices offer an opportunity to practice hope hundreds of times each day. Shabbat itself is "*mei'ein olam habah*"—a taste of the World to Come, an opportunity for us to feel into that expansive place of hope. Birchot HaShachar reminds us that we have a place in this world; each morning, roosters crow and we get up, remember who we are, find our inner point of freedom, and to move in a world that is waiting for our steps. The psalms of P'sukei D'Zimra sensitize us to the grand and awesome beauty of our world and the profundity that we are seen, known, and loved—and that we can offer witnessing, empathy, and compassion. Every bracha we say adds to our mindful awareness. Every decision we make consciously about what to eat or do or say reminds us: we matter here. We are seen and counted on, practically and spiritually.

Not only for ourselves do we need this spiritual attitude. The rest of the world demands it of us, especially in the most difficult of times, because if human beings do not take responsibility for keeping that hope alive, it will be lost.

When Yaacov says “לישועתך קויתי הי” – “I hope for your salvation, God,” he models something else for us as well, and this is the second, related point about hope. It is this: When we need deliverance, and our prayers seem not to be answered, there is another angle that we might try. Yaacov links his own circumstance to the *Shekhinah*—God’s indwelling presence—in the belief that the *Shekhinah* also suffers exile and needs human empathy and care.

This is where the *Netivot Shalom* gets interesting. The *Shekhinah* feels our sadness and disappointment over the brokenness in our lives together with us. When we suffer, God suffers, too. As the Psalmist says, “I will be with the human being in distress.” “עמו אנוכי בצרה” (Ps. 91:15). This is not merely divine empathy, but genuine suffering on God’s part. The Divinity we hold within us hurts; God hurts. Moreover, when God’s hope for humanity is fractured in our reality, and human flourishing is diminished, the *Shekhinah* experiences exile. But when we open to, and cultivate, that spiritually awake aspect of ourselves that feels beyond the finite, we draw the *Shekhinah* closer to us.

And *that* is what makes this hope practice not a delusional form of religious escapism but a genuine linking of our will with the Divine will. Expanding our consciousness to empathize with God’s own distress brings the Divine dream for humanity closer to our reality. Redeeming God from exile, we hasten our own redemption—if not today, then soon. We feel how our own earnest hopes are wrapped in the Divine hope. Even as we remain rooted in reality, that hope we share keeps our reality from locking us in.

Allowing ourselves to live with hope is key to our survival in the moment and our thriving in the big picture. We cannot make a rational case for this hope, but we are wired to trust it intuitively. Connecting to God’s own yearning for human flourishing brings our hope home—literally, opening us to that inner point of freedom so that we can laugh with our friends, dance at weddings, make our way through pain and discomfort, fall in love, and feel that we are not lost even in the most painful times. Hope, like love, is not rational, but comes to us as a gift given to every person at birth, from a place our hearts know is real and greater than our finite circumstances.

I have tried to share with you a condensed version of a five hour class. Midway, Matt shared a beautiful poem by Rilke, with which I will conclude:

Go to the Limits of Your Longing
by Rainer Maria Rilke

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.*

May we take one another by the hand, hopeful in our seriousness, and serious in our hope.

**The Netivot Shalom, a rebbe called by the name of his most significant writing (his full name was Reb Sholom Noach Berezovsky), was born in 1911. He was the Slonimer Rebbe from 1981 up to his death just 23 years ago, a role he served mostly from his home in Jerusalem, having made aliyah in 1933. He published his seven-volume work, Nesivos Sholom, in 1982.*