

Living with Hope
YK 5778
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After Adam and Eve had been banished from the Garden of Eden, God saw that they were penitent and took their fall very much to heart. And as God is a compassionate Parent, God said to them gently:

“Unfortunate children! I have punished you for your sin and have driven you out of the Garden of Eden where you were living without care and in great well-being. Now you are about to enter into a world of sorrow and trouble the like of which staggers the imagination. However, I want you to know that My benevolence and My love for you will never end. I know that you will meet with a lot of tribulation in the world and that will embitter your lives. For that reason I give you out of My heavenly treasure this priceless pearl. Look! It is a tear! And when grief overtakes you and your heart aches so that you are not able to endure it, and great anguish grips your soul, then there will fall from your eyes this tiny tear. Your burden will grow lighter then.”

When Adam and Eve heard those words sorrow overcame them. Tears welled up in their eyes, rolled down their cheeks and fell to earth.

And it was these tears of anguish that first moistened the earth. Adam and Eve left them as precious inheritance to their children. And since then, whenever a human being is in great trouble and his heart aches and his spirit is oppressed then the tears begin to flow from his eyes, and lo, the gloom is lifted.

The past year many of us have experienced sorrow, trouble, and tribulation. We have felt an oppression of spirit due to loss of a job, a reversal of financial well-being, divorce, the death of a loved one, or perhaps the diagnosis of severe illness afflicting us or people dear to us. Many of us have indeed shed our share of tears. And through those tears I have witnessed many who have mustered the strength and moral courage to fight back: first by clearly acknowledging the challenge they face, the gravity of their situation, the severity of their diagnosis; and then, refusing to surrender to it, and instead choosing life.

Choosing life – choosing a positive attitude to treasure each and every day... to try and overcome the challenges, to keep fighting, to find some modicum of peace and serenity; to pursue the best medical care and most rigorous personal health discipline, and through sheer will to live; to keep beating the odds, one day at a time; to live life on their terms. And lest you think that, “it won’t

happen to me,” let me assure you -- life happens to all of us... none of us are exempt.

Wealth didn't exempt Howard Hughes from OCD, chronic pain and becoming a recluse.

Being a hall of fame baseball player didn't exempt NY Yankee star first baseman Lou Gehrig (the Iron Horse) from ALS or what is now commonly referred to as “Lou Gehrig's Disease.”

Being a world-renowned author didn't exempt Steven King from being an alcoholic.

Being a famous movie star or entertainer didn't exempt Marilyn Monroe from addiction; or Michael J. Fox from Parkinson's Disease; or Catherine Zeta-Jones and Carrie Fisher from Bi-Polar Disorder; or Robin Williams from Depression. And now we can add Julia Louis-Dreyfus to this list... Her fame and notoriety didn't exempt her from breast cancer.

Being a world-class scientist didn't exempt Stephen Hawking from ALS or Carl Sagan from Myelodysplasia (a blood cancer); it didn't

exempt Sir Isaac Newton from psychotic tendencies and mood swings or Charles Darwin from hallucinations.

Being a great artist didn't exempt Van Gogh from schizophrenia and epilepsy or Michelangelo from Asperger's.

Being a great composer didn't exempt Beethoven from being deaf.

Being the President of the United States didn't exempt FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) from a paralytic illness that paralyzed his legs and confined him to a wheelchair.

Being a person of faith, a rabbi, didn't exempt Harold Kushner, author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," from losing his 14-year-old son from Progeria – a degenerative disease that results in premature aging.

Yes, life is not fair. It's life. It happens to us all.

Throughout my career in the rabbinate, it has been my privilege to know and be with many individuals to whom life happened. All of them I would consider courageous souls...And none more courageous than my wife Ava.

This past year, life happened to us. Since her diagnosis (that I shared with this congregation last Thanksgiving) of Primary Progressive Aphasia – an Alzheimer’s Disease that robs one of their words, Ava has chosen not to let it rob her of her spirit nor her laughter. It has not robbed her of the sparkle in her eyes nor her infectious dimpled smile. It has not robbed her, or I, of our love.

We have indeed shed our share of tears. However, more than the tears, it has been Ava’s strength of character, her sheer determination, and her desire not to give up or give in that has helped dispel our gloom. Ava chooses to live life, and in so doing she inspires **me** not to give up, not to give in... but rather to live life not just for her, but with her in every moment we have together.

Still, there is no denying the grain of truth that in some of the bleakest times, expressed in the words of our High Holy Day prayer, *Unetane Tokef*, that we utter today: some will be tranquil and some will be troubled, some will be calm and some will be tormented; some will live and some will die: some by fire and some by water, some by human brutality and some by events beyond human control (like an Irma or Harvey). Still it is essential to remember that the inescapability of loss, the certainty of strife, and the inevitability of death are not the same as the loss of hope.

As long as there's another morning to watch the sun rise, or a moment to share with a loved one; a few extra minutes to hear your favorite song, enjoy a cup of coffee, or savor your favorite dessert; as long as there's a moment of calm and tranquility amidst the fluctuating cycles of a debilitating illness, there is reason for hope. To quote Stephen Hawking: "However bad life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. Where there's life, there's hope."

Indeed, hope has extraordinary power to shape our lives – it gives us the power to face our difficulties, to choose life and living, or succumb, give up, and give in to death. Ava's strength, dignity, and her ability to laugh, smile, and enjoy the moment is the same will that can raise any and all of us above our afflictions and challenges so that we may be here today with a heart full of hope.

There's a story in the Japanese Zen tradition of a warrior chased by his enemies over a precipice, clutching to a bramble for dear life. If his hand slips or the bramble gets uprooted, he'll crash down into the rocky canyon far below; if he does nothing his enemies will cut him down. Suddenly he notices a plump ripe strawberry within reach of his free hand. He grabs it, pops it into his mouth, and delights at its extraordinary sweetness.

This is the secret of hope, not to pray for a miracle, but rather to embrace the miracles that, in the words of our daily prayer, greet us every day and are with us every hour -- morning, noon, and night. Even Albert Einstein, who referred to himself as a religious non-believer said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” For those who appreciate and treasure the daily miracles around us, are the most fit to push back against the tide of despair -- one day at a time, and even one breath at a time.

In fact the Psalm we recite for these *Yamim Noraim* – these Days of Awe, Psalm 27, concludes with the exclamation: *kavveh el Adonai, chazak v’y’ameitz libecha...* – “Hope in God, for God will give you courage, God will strengthen your heart...” God does this so that you may live with hope. And that, my friends, is the only way to live... for not to have hope is its own death sentence.

So, let me conclude today with my favorite story of hope. It’s a story about the Wise Men and people of Chelm -- a mythical village populated, according to Jewish folklore, by fools...

One day a stranger came upon the village of Chelm. Walking through the streets he noticed the unusual way many of the

Chelmites went about their business. They walked with their heads turned up, toward the sky. Curious, the stranger sought out the Wise Men of Chelm to find out why the people walked around in this strange way. The Wise Men were easy to recognize. They were very old, wore long black coats, black high hats, and had long, white beards. He asked the Wise Men why the people of the village walked as they did. The Wise Men invited the stranger to join them for tea, and told him this story.

Some time ago the Chelmites heard that a great fortune in gold awaited them in a far-off land. All they had to do to claim the fortune was to go to that distant land and bring it back to Chelm. The Chelmites were very excited about this treasure, and decided to send most of the village's men to retrieve the many bags of gold. To make sure that nothing went wrong they also asked their Wise Men to accompany the village men.

Excitement grew as the Chelmites planned their extraordinary journey. They were certain that once the fortune was brought back to Chelm, the people of the village would have no more problems.

After much planning, the time for their journey had finally come. Day after day they traveled up steep mountains, down into dry

deserts, and through green fields. At long last they arrived, and what they saw filled them with wonder. They stood, open-mouthed, staring at bags and bags of gold covering the countryside as far as the eye could see. There was their fortune, just as had been foretold!

They sang and danced, and envisioned the heroic welcome they would receive upon their return to Chelm. Their spirits soared as they lifted the bags of gold and threw them over their shoulders. Struggling and swaying under the tremendous weight of the gold, they began their journey home.

As the Chelmites walked hour after hour in the hot sun, the gold seemed to get heavier and heavier. Some men, with their legs bent by the weight of the heavy bags, could go no farther and stopped. They pleaded with their Wise Men, “Help! You must do something.”

“Yes, yes. We must do something,” agreed the Wise Men. They wrung their hands, paced back and forth and concentrated. Sure enough, one of them soon cried out, “I have an idea!”

After sharing the idea with all of the Wise Men, they called the Chelmites together and said, “The gold is hard for you to carry

because you are tired, your feet are sore, your backs have become weak, and you have already walked a long way.”

“So, here is our plan. With our gold we will buy horses and wagons. We will still have great riches, you see, but you will not have to carry the riches; the riches will carry you!”

A great cheer went up from the Chelmites. “Excellent! Excellent! We will sit in our wagons and the horses will carry us!”

So again, with spirits high, the Chelmites set out toward Chelm, but this time they rode in new, sturdy wagons pulled by fine, strong horses. They continued along in this fashion until the horses stopped and refused to go farther.

“The horses haven’t been given food or water,” said a young man.

“Of course, horses must eat and drink. We just never thought of that. But we have no money for food.”

Again the Chelmites appealed to their Wise Men. “What shall we do?”

A Chelmite, thinking without the aid of the Wise Men, cried out, “We can sell our horses to buy food because food, of course, is always valuable.”

“How can you be so stupid!” shouted the Wise Men. “That is a very foolish idea! Our horses and wagons are so valuable that they are worth mountains and mountains of food. If we buy food it would be heavier than the gold. You could not carry the gold. How do you think you will carry a mountain of food? And, remember, food spoils; gold does not. No, no, we must not exchange our horses and wagons for food. Let us think of something that is light.”

Again, the Wise Men wrung their hands, paced back and forth, and concentrated. After some time, the wisest of the Wise Men shouted out, “I have an idea! You want something light?”

“Of course!” the Chelmites answered.

“Feathers!” exclaimed the Wise Man.

“Feathers!” cried the Chelmites. “Of course, what could be lighter than a feather? Why didn’t we think of that?”

And so the Chelmites sold their horses and wagons, and bought bags and bags of feathers that now covered the countryside as far as the eye could see.

The Chelmites shook their heads in despair. “Oh, my! How can we carry such great mounds of feathers?”

And again they called upon their Wise Men to advise them.

The Wise Men huddled together. One of them wet his finger and stuck it up in the air. There was a strong wind blowing. At last the Wise Men announced to the Chelmites, “There is no need to worry. You have made a good trade. The feathers are better than horses.”

“But what can you mean?” asked the Chelmites. “We don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t understand. How can you? You are not Wise Men. Now, do you know in what direction the wind is blowing?”

“Yes,” said the Chelmites as they pointed toward the east.

Then, one of the Wise Men ripped open a bag of feathers and watched as they were quickly carried away by the wind.

“And in what direction are the feathers blowing?”

“East,” they all shouted in delight. “Toward Chelm!”

“You are quite right,” said the Wise Men smiling. “Now do you understand? My good people of Chelm, you do not have to carry the feathers home; God’s own good wind will carry them!”

So, the Chelmites ripped open the many hundreds of bags filled with feathers, and soon the sky was black with feathers.

“Oh, how wonderful and wise our Wise Men are!” the men said as they watched the feathers fly away. “These feathers will fill the streets and roofs of Chelm. And we all know how valuable feathers are.”

The Chelmites then resumed their long journey home. When they arrived in Chelm, they found the village looking exactly as it had before they left. There were no feathers to be seen anywhere. They

walked all around the town asking over and over, “Where are the feathers? What has happened to the feathers?”

“What are you talking about?” answered the villagers. “There are no feathers here.”

“Oh no, we are ruined! We have lost everything!”

When the people of Chelm were told what had happened they joined in the lament. Everyone cried, “Our gold is gone, our horses and wagons are gone, our feathers are gone. We are ruined!”

The Wise Men stepped forward and raised their hands. “Stop,” they demanded, “This is nonsense. Stop immediately!”

When the Chelmites had calmed down, the Wise Men continued, “Don’t despair, dear Chelmites. The feathers will return in good time. Patience is what is called for. We need to wait patiently and have faith that our day will come. One day the sky will be black with feathers. When they fall on Chelm they will fill the town and from then on our lives will be filled with riches.”

“And that is why the Chelmites walk around with their faces turned up,” the Wise Men said to the stranger. “They are patient and hopeful that their day of great fortune will come. Actually, they are sure that their fortune will come. It is just a matter of time.”

The stranger could see for himself that this hope kept the Chelmites in good spirits. He thanked the Wise Men for the tea and for the tale and went on his way, with his head up, looking toward the heavens.

Indeed, life happens to all of us... Whether Chelmites or Floridians. Jew or Gentile. White or Black. None of us are exempt. Not people of wealth, not people of fame, not people of science, not politicians, nor people of faith. It is the eternal truth that imbues the human commonality of us all. None of us are immune from challenge – be it loss of love, loss of job, loss of health, or loss of life.

The question for each and every one of you here today, the question we must all face each and every day, is what will you do when challenged, how will you respond?

My answer lies in our Faith, in our Tradition, in the words of our High Holy Day Psalm... *Kavveh el Adonai, chazak v'ya'ameitz libecha* --

Hope in God, for God will give you courage; God will strengthen your heart, that no matter the challenge, no matter the diagnosis, no matter the circumstances, every moment of your life can be lived with hope.

So, lift up your head; hold them high; live with hope – hope in this moment, and hope in, and for, every moment you live. Amen.