

Commanded to Hope

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Shana Tova. I look out at you as we begin this 10-day period we call our Jewish New Year and think about how many times already – just tonight – we have said those two words: *Shana Tova*. Actually, there are volumes in those seemingly straight-forward words. *Shana Tova*. A good year. It is a statement. It is a proclamation. But it is more than that. Just saying *Shana Tova*, is a prayer, it is a hope, it is a yearning; it is an act of defiance. For in spite of all evidence to the contrary, we are committed to the vision of a *Shana Tova*, a good year. Oh indeed the world has much goodness to it and surely the year 5777 will be filled with goodness. Outrageous goodness even. Deeds of heroism beyond our wildest imagination. Breath-taking miracles. Babies born into the world every second. The beauty of nature, the resilience of the human spirit, hands touching hands and hearts touching hearts.

And yet we are being less than honest with ourselves if we don't acknowledge that those two simple words, *Shana Tova*, fly in the face of reality. For there is so much evidence suggesting that in all likelihood it will not be a very good year. Just think of the issues we have had to face this past year: war in Syria, terrorism on the rise, racism in the United States leading to riots and shootings, police being killed in the line of duty, Israel's very existence being questioned, rising anti-Semitism and emboldened white supremacists, increasing poverty and increasing political intransigence. To paraphrase from another holiday for just a moment: *Mah nishtana ha shana ha zot mi'kol ha'shanim? Why should this year be different from any other year?*

If 5777 is anything like 5776 was, then it is likely to be a year of bloodshed, a year of poverty, a year filled with the bombing of innocents, the death of loved ones, the loneliness of the soul, the devastations of illness. But *Shana Tova*, we continue to say, nevertheless. May this be a good year, even though it will surely include bad outcomes large and small. We not only say, we affirm, we pray, we declare *Shana Tova*.

To a good year, a sweet year, a healthy year, a meaningful year, a rich year, a peaceful year. What a list. Yes, yet again, a new year has come and yes, yet again, we are hopeful. For we have the faith, the yearning, the

desire, the courage, the audacity to pray that this time, this year, we will get it right.

Why *should* this year be different from any other year? We have no documentation, no proof whatsoever; that there is any likelihood at all, that we will get it right this time. But here we are. Praying for just that. Believing in just that. That we can get it right. That we can dare to hope - yes, even in the face of ridiculous odds, that we can make this year, the five thousand, seven hundred and seventy-seventh try, the year when everything good happens.

It is with some hesitation that I have to remind you of that popular adage that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different result. And still we persist: *Shana Tova*. I believe it was Mark Twain who said that the definition of religion is “believing in that which you know ain’t true.” If indeed that is the definition of religion, *then I proudly claim myself to be a Mark Twain kind of Jew*. Believing in that which isn’t yet true. Isn’t that the basis for getting anywhere in life?

Now of course I know what Mark Twain’s critique of religion was all about. And no, Judaism is not a religion that flies in the face of reality; Judaism is a religion that celebrates reality. We are not in favor of utilizing prayer alone to feed the hungry, or to end the wars in the Middle East, or to bring healing to those with illness. But we do believe that the hungry can be fed, that there can be an end to war, and that the possibility for healing is always before us, even for the terminally ill.

Earlier last month I was catching up with a minister friend of mine from Minnesota, an old friend that I had not spoken with in a few years. We spoke of the world’s travails since last we had been together: the immigration crisis, the increasing socio-economic wedge between rich and poor in the United States, gun violence in our country, the meanness of spirit in our politics. After acknowledging the long list, the minister then said: “How can you have hope? Where is hope today?” And I responded in the only way I know how and I said: “I am commanded to hope.”

And indeed I believe that with all my heart. I am commanded to hope. We are commanded to hope. Judaism commands us to hope, even in dire times. As a matter of fact, Judaism commands us to hope, especially in dire times. Hope is not something you sit back and decide to embrace based on the odds. Hope is not something you pull off the shelf because things are looking up. Hope is not cultivated upon successes and ease in life.

Af al pi chen, we say. Against all odds, we hope. *Af al pi chen*, our brothers and sisters literally said as they marched to their slaughter in Auschwitz: in spite of everything, I believe. Anne Frank, with all the gumption

that her 13-year old body & soul could muster, said: “In spite of everything, I believe that people are really good at heart.” Did she say that based on the evidence of her Nazi dominated world? No. She said it anyway, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. *Ayn breirah*, we say in Hebrew. We have no choice. For we are commanded to hope.

So at the outset of our High Holy Day season, on this very first evening of Rosh Hashanah, I want to say loud and clear that the work we have ahead of us today and tomorrow, and until we hear that last blast on the shofar at the end of *Neilah* on Yom Kippur, the prayers we will utter and the focus we will bring are all about hope. For at its very heart that is how we express our faith: we have faith in human beings, faith in our community, faith in our ability to change our ways, to mend our faults, to understand our purpose, to reach out to each other in our need and with our love, that we might bring healing to ourselves and to others.

This Rosh Hashanah we yearn for leaders in our society who can fill our hearts with hope. There is so much cynicism, so much despair, so much anger, but the key to true leadership is hope. We crave the dreamers, the visionaries, the passion and the love that come from daring to see the world as it can be at its best.

What our country needs now more than ever are political leaders that radiate integrity. The soul-searching we are invited to do at the New Year challenges each of us not only to seek out leaders of integrity and companions of integrity, but first and foremost to lead lives of integrity ourselves. You would think it would be simple to be true to ourselves, for though we can lie to others, we actually know what we ourselves may have said or done. It should be an oxymoron to lie to one’s own self. But it doesn’t seem to work that way. We are so good at deceiving ourselves. That is why being true to ourselves is a fundamental challenge that faces us over the course of these holidays. We are challenged to be honest about what we have said and done, about who we are, about how much effort we have put into our actions, about our limitations and our potential, about being authentic to our best vision of who we are.

It is a constant personal challenge to be true to our own selves. How rare it is to encounter a person so true. How practically impossible it is to encounter such a person these days in the political arena.

To speak the truth is hard enough and we give that task a noble name; we call it honesty. But to live the truth is even harder and so we give that task an even greater name; we call it integrity. The rabbis were commenting upon the word “*chasid*” one day and asked each other, “What is the definition of a ‘*chasid*’”? They concluded it had nothing to do with movements or sects or denominations of Judaism. Everyone could be a *chasid*. What does it take? Doing more than is required. ‘How so?’ the Rabbis ask. ‘Well, for example’,

they noted, ‘the Torah requires us to be honest’, as it says in Leviticus: “You shall not deceive your neighbor.” But, the rabbis teach us, to be a *chasid*, you have to do more. A *Chasid* will not even deceive themselves. May we all be *chasids* in 5777.

The difficulty of being honest to ourselves unfolds in a story from the life of Picasso about art and authenticity. An art dealer in Paris bought a painting bearing Picasso’s signature and he wanted to have the painting authenticated by Picasso himself. So he went to the master, who looked at it and said quickly, “It’s a fake.” Two years later, the same art dealer acquired another signed painting. Once again he showed it to the artist and once again Picasso replied, “It’s a fake.” But this time the dealer protested. “Why I myself was present when you painted this canvas. With my own eyes I saw you do it.” Whereupon Picasso shrugged and said, “I often paint fakes.”

We only get one canvas. What shall we create? On this Rosh Hashanah, it is written; on Yom Kippur it is sealed. May we have the strength and the courage and the audacity to be true to our own selves, that the artwork that is our life, the *sefer chayim* that is open before us, may tell a story that radiates integrity.

Judaism commands us to hope but we are not permitted to hope from the sidelines. We must participate in that most holy of tasks: *tikun olam*, repair of our world. We Jews believe that it is our mission, our very purpose in life, to repair this world that is in such need of healing. We call Rosh Hashanah *Yom Harat HaOlam*, the birthday of the world. As part of that birthday, God created us, human beings, to be God’s partners in the holy act of creation. Our most creative act is *tikun olam*, to do the work that helps repair the brokenness of our world.

The task is overwhelming, but it is right in front of us. In *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Tarfon reminds us, that ours is not to complete the task, but neither can we run away from it and turn our heads and ignore it. There is so much to do, much of it so basic we can start right now. Begin by looking people in the eye. If you take the time to truly look, you will see the divine spirit dwelling there, in every human being.

The task of repairing our world is overwhelming. So many problems. But hope means believing they can be solved. How do you avoid being overwhelmed by a world-wide refugee crisis that has left over 11 million people from Syria alone seeking refuge in other countries? You start with one. Step by step. One by one. It is why this year, we at Temple Beth Tikvah have chosen to partner with our friends at the 1st Congregational Church of Guilford in sponsoring an immigrant family. To save one life is to save the entire world, the Talmud teaches. And so we signed on to receive the next family in need of safe haven. We didn’t know where they would be from, but that wasn’t what

mattered. What mattered is that they were refugees and we were all once refugees and we could respond one by one by one to an international humanitarian crisis. And so our family came. They came from Syria, from their beautiful city of Homs where their business was bombed and their home was bombed, to four years waiting and hoping in Jordan where they were vetted and vetted, to JFK International Airport and to the loving arms of our volunteer team of heroes that have been helping to transform one singular family of refugees into Americans. How can you not have hope when you see the children, 12-year old RoWAN and 11-year old Reda and 5 year-old Marya, laugh and play and go to school and learn English faster than any one of us could learn Hebrew, that's for sure.

Our family has challenges. They are not going away. And the prophetic voice still calls upon us. It calls us to justice; it calls us to a life of integrity, a life in which our words and our deeds are one. And it calls us, no, it commands us to hope.

For this world, despite its tragedies and despite its horrors, is filled with beauty and filled with wonder. "O world," we say with Edna St. Vincent Millay, "I cannot hold thee close enough! World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!"

And it is this world, despite its tragedies and despite its horrors, that holds out the hope that indeed, *bayom hahu yihiyeh Adonai echad*, one day the world shall be one and we will all know that we are children of the same God.

Our congregation is celebrating 40 years this year in this house of ours that our founders built. It took hard work and chutzpah to build this house, and even more chutzpah to name this house. For we dare to call ourselves Beth Tikvah, the House of Hope.

Let us fill this house with hope in the New Year. Let us open the doors of our House of Hope and spread the message of hope into the world in which we live. For if we dare to hope we may dare to live fully and if we dare to live fully we may reach for the stars and if we believe we can reach those stars we may just yet make this New Year of 5777 a *Shana Tova*, a good year, a sweet year, a healthy year, a meaningful year, a rich year, a peaceful year, a new year worthy of our highest hopes.

Ken yihi ratzon. May it be God's will.

SHANA TOVA



