

Hope

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Last week, on one of those gorgeous mornings when it was starting to feel like spring, I had a brief but memorable conversation in the WRT parking lot with another parent who was dropping off his kid at our preschool. We made small talk -- and I casually asked how he and his family were doing, expecting the usual response that you get these days: we're managing. But instead, he told me that his parents had been vaccinated, that they were making plans to see them for Passover -- and gesturing at the warm, spring-like air, he told me that he was, for the first time in many months, beginning to regain the feeling of hope.

Over the past 12 months of this crisis, among the many familiar comforts that have vanished, perhaps none has been more painful than our collective loss of hope. When every day looks the same as the last; when ordinary activities like going to school or shopping for groceries have become a health risk; when jobs have disappeared with no clear idea as to when or if they'll ever return; when we've been isolated, for months on end, from the people that we love -- it is easy to understand why our sense of hope has gone.

In a year that has been full of distress, how are we to maintain our hope? In a world where despair would be so easily understood, how do we find the courage to believe that hope is always warranted?

Hope has always been one of the Jewish people's core principles. Israel, the only Jewish country in the world, has as the title of its national anthem *Hatikvah*, "the hope" -- boldly declaring that despite the many tragedies that have befallen our people over the millenia, *od lo avdah tikvateinu*, "still, our hope is not lost." If we look to our religious tradition, we find that when the medieval Spanish philosopher Maimonides, widely considered to be the greatest Jewish sage of all time, set out to articulate a concise statement of the central tenets of Judaism, he listed among his Thirteen Articles of Faith the belief that, no matter the circumstance, hope is always warranted -- writing in his own religious idiom: "I believe with a perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he may delay, I will wait every day for his coming."

But among all our stories and symbols, there is perhaps no greater statement of the Jewish commitment to hope than the holiday of Passover. Consider the story: the Israelites are in direst of circumstances -- first, they are forced into slave labor, and just when they think that their situation couldn't be more dehumanizing, all of their newborn baby boys are torn from their mother's arms and drowned in the Nile River. Upon seeing his people's suffering, Moses flees to the desert. Out there, he has a vision of God: a bush that is on fire, and yet somehow is not consumed by the flame. Taking this vision back with him to Egypt, Moses inspires the Israelites to believe that, like the Burning Bush, our suffering does not have to consume us. Even in the depths of degradation, the human spirit can endure.

It is far from a given that we should be inclined towards hope. If anything, a clear-eyed assessment of the world might logically lead to despair. There is so much in life to contend with, so many forces that would tear us down. We humans must not face only our vulnerability, but also bear the psychological burden of being aware of our vulnerability. When we take a logical view of the world, it would be easy to fall into nihilism -- the feeling that life is meaningless, that nothing matters, that hope is foolish. It makes sense to find ourselves asking the question: "To be, or not to be?" -- or feeling, as the humorist has cynically [put it](#), that "life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering... and it's all over much too quickly."

But we should note that hope is not the opposite of cynicism. The opposite of cynicism is naivety. Cynicism is the belief that everything will go wrong. Naivety is the belief that everything will go right. Hope, by contrast, straddles them both: at once acknowledging that everything might go wrong, and nevertheless believing that something could go right.

Hope is not guided by logic. It is guided by something that is beyond logic -- some intuition, some non-rational wisdom that is embedded deep within the human spirit. We cannot logically explain how the human spirit withstands even the direst of circumstances. We cannot demonstrate by scientific proof why, in the words of one Holocaust survivor, "a person can live for three days without water but cannot live three minutes without hope."¹ Hope operates beyond the laws of science. It requires a different sort of explanation.

Over the past week, I have been in search of that different explanation -- in search of the intuition, the lived experience, the deep human wisdom that, despite our better judgement, inclines the human spirit towards hope. For guidance, I had conversations with a dozen WRT congregants, where I asked them the following question: Do you believe that, no matter the circumstance, hope is always warranted -- and if so, what it is that gives that you sense?

It's a question to which I sincerely would be interested to hear [your](#) response -- and I invite everyone who is joining us tonight to please reach out and share your responses with me. I would love to hear from you. The question, again, is: Do you believe that, no matter the circumstance, hope is always warranted -- and if so, what it is that gives that you sense?

The dozen conversations that I had over the past week were with congregants ranging in age from 9 to 89 -- and the responses were equally wide-ranging. I'll share now just a few of those responses, as a composite portrait of hope.

One congregant said: After my husband died, I thought that I'd never be happy again. But then, two years later, my daughter got married. The weekend of the wedding, of course we all missed my late husband -- but still, I was happy. It wasn't the same kind of happiness that I had known when my husband was alive; it was a different and new kind of happiness that had grown within my grief. That is how hope works. It is like a seed that is buried deep underground. Even when it

¹ The late Holocaust survivor and Reform Rabbi, Rabbi Hugo Gryn, quoting his father. As presented in Michael Marmur's article in *Reform Judaism Magazine*, "[Lifeline to the Future](#)" (Summer 2009) -- quoting Gryn's book *Chasing Shadows: Memories of a Vanished World* (2000)

is covered under thick layers of mud, slowly it grows -- until one day, it bursts through the surface: a flower, blossoming in the dirt of life.

Another congregant said: I am grateful for the support system that was there to catch me when I needed it: my family, my friends, my community, even the everyday kindness of strangers -- the grocery cashier who wishes you a good day, and means it; the taxi driver who wants to make friendly conversation. These small kindnesses remind me that no one is alone, that humans are essentially good -- that when terrible things happen, we can count on one another.

Another congregant said: hope is like a crutch -- and I mean that in a good way. Crutches help us to get around when we can't walk on our own. When my brother was sick, I prayed every day that he would get better. Prayer was something I could lean on for hope. When it became clear that he wasn't going to get better, my prayer shifted, to include not only a hope for a miracle cure, but also, for a cessation to his suffering. It was a different kind of hope, but a hope nevertheless -- something firm on which I could rest, until I was strong enough to stand on my own.

One congregant said: in the AA program, one of the most important steps is to "acknowledge a power that is greater than ourselves" -- that is, to admit that there are some things that are beyond my control. The illusion of control is what causes our anguish when things don't work out the way we might have hoped. And anguish leads to the destructive behaviors: the drinking, the drugs, the gambling, the rage. If instead, when things go wrong, we acknowledge a power that is greater than ourselves, we can learn to accept the things we cannot change, and find a more productive way to get through them.

Another congregant said: I think of hope as having two layers -- the day-to-day, and the exalted. Day to day, we hope that we can make it through. My husband is frail, and I am his primary caregiver. What will he need from me today? Will I have the strength to persist from morning until night -- caring for him, preparing the meals, doing the laundry, paying the bills? And then, there is the layer of hope: the lofty, the exalted. These are my hopes not just for today, but rather, my hopes for my life, for the impact I'd like to make in the world -- my hopes for humanity. I find that having some hope in the exalted helps me to get through when I lose my hope in the day-to-day. If you believe that there is a Promised Land, then it is easier to endure 40 years of wandering in the desert. I take a swim in the pool. I gaze at the ocean in wonder. My husband says something that is cute, or sweet, or wonderful -- and I remember the love that we've shared for almost 70 years. These moments of beauty, these glimpses of the Promised Land, give me the strength I need to get through.

On Passover night, we will gather around our seder tables and ask the age-old question: Why is this night different from all other nights? And of course, we will recount all the familiar reasons that are recorded in our haggadah.

But if we are attuned to it, then we might discover that there is another important way in which Passover is different from all other nights. On all other nights, we might feel as if we will forever be stuck in this global crisis. On all other nights, we might give in to cynicism, to doubt, or despair.

But not on this special night. Because on this night, we do things differently. On this night, we reach down deep into the human spirit. On this night, we affirm an intuition that defies all reason. On this night, we declare that hope is always warranted.