

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah  
I spoke about an important spiritual gift that our ancestors gave us  
To help us persist and emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.  
The gift that I spoke about was the spiritual lesson of honoring our grief,  
Which teaches us that feeling our grief and loss  
Will allow us to fully return to life  
and to look towards the future anew.

Tonight I want to talk about a second spiritual gift  
that our ancestors gave us to help us persist and move into the future with strength.  
In light of their own experiences of crisis and rupture,  
Our ancestors taught us about the importance of cultivating hope within ourselves  
In the face of enduring challenges.

**(SLOW)** Our journey through COVID-19 has been deeply challenging and constantly changing.  
As with disasters of many kinds, our experience of COVID-19 maps onto what is called  
“the emotional lifecycle of a disaster”.  
We experienced the first phase of this lifecycle, known as the pre-disaster phase,  
when COVID-19 was just beginning to emerge.  
This was a time of great concern and uncertainty.  
We then quickly moved into the impact phase, when the pandemic actually arrived.  
Many of us felt shocked and afraid,  
and we took action for the sake of self-preservation and family protection.  
We might also remember this phase as the toilet paper panic phase.  
We experienced the heroic phase,  
When we all came together to help one another.  
Strangers and friends went out of their way to lend a helping hand.  
Mutual aid networks burst onto the scene.  
Essential workers kept our society functioning as the rest of us went into lockdown.  
This then brought us to the honeymoon phase,  
When we felt an incredible sense of community cohesion and optimism about the future.  
We felt connected, and supported.  
We felt like we were in it together.

And this brought us to the next phase, which we have been in for awhile.  
This is called the disillusionment phase.  
In this phase, we have experienced many ups and downs,  
And have come to realize that we are in it for the long haul.  
We have reached new and hopeful frontiers,  
like the arrival of the vaccine and times of low case numbers.  
But we have also experienced difficult lows,  
like the rise of dangerous variants and rapid spikes in case numbers.  
In addition we have experienced what are called trigger events,  
Anniversary events that trigger the discouragement and sadness of this time,

Things like our first COVID High Holidays, our first Passover without a big family seder, or our second birthday since COVID started.

These ups and downs and trigger events have made this a very difficult phase to be in.

Eventually, we will reach the reconstruction phase, the final phase of this lifecycle.

We will reach an overall feeling of recovery.

We will start to rebuild our lives and adjust to a new long term normal.

But we are not there yet.

What is so difficult about the moment we are currently in

Is that for a number of months we thought we were.

People were getting vaccinated.

We were beginning to take our masks off. Everything was opening up.

Yet a number of new developments,

like the Delta variant and climbing case numbers,

Have changed all of this.

This has left many of us feeling discouraged, and demoralized.

This has left many of us feeling anxious about what the future will hold.

We realize that we are in the midst of an evolving status quo

Yet we are not clear about where this all goes

or what it looks like to get to a stage of recovery.

This experience of setbacks and lack of clarity is very spiritually difficult.

The journey through the emotional lifecycle of a disaster is a long and arduous one.

In this way it is similar to the inner journey of the poet who wrote Psalm 27,

the Psalm for the High Holiday season.

*Let's all turn to Psalm 27 in our Machzor so we can follow along-*

*It is on page 485.*

In this Psalm, the poet expresses their fear and despair,

Or as Conservative Rabbi and Author Edward Feld puts it,

they express their sense of inner disintegration.

The beginning of Psalm 27 describes someone with deep faith and confidence

in the sacred order of our world.

"The Lord is my light and my help", they say. "Whom shall I fear?"

"The Lord is the strength of my life", they say. "Whom shall I dread?" (27:1).

But this confidence quickly comes apart.

As the psalm unfolds,

we realize that this confidence masks the Psalmist's true desperation and fears.

Instead of feeling supported by God and assured by God's presence,

the Psalmist feels besieged by enemies and abandoned by the people around them.

They no longer trust in the sacred order of the world.

Because of this, the Psalmists pleads for God's help:

"Do not hide Yourself from me;

Turn not in anger from Your servant.

You have always been my help;

Do not forsake me, O God, my Deliverer” (27:9).  
These words are words of intense anguish,  
Of solid ground eroded.  
The confidence they once projected is no more.

Yet the psalm does not end here.  
It ends with words of hope.

קוֹה אֶל-יְהוָה

Have hope in God

וְזָקַק וַיִּצְמַח לְבָבִי

Be strong, and take courage

אֶל-יְהוָה

Have hope in God.

This response, according to Rabbi Feld, comes from an inner voice  
Which is responding to the Psalmist’s doubt and desperation.  
In this way the Psalm is portraying an internal conversation  
Between a voice of despair and a voice of hope  
(*Joy, Despair, and Hope: Reading the Psalms, 83*).  
Amidst the psalmist’s pain, fear, and uncertainty,  
A hopeful voice emerges.

This hopeful voices gives them strength and courage  
In the face of a reality that besieges them.

With this ending, the Psalmist offers us an important spiritual insight:

In moments of intense trial,

We must look within ourselves to find hope.

If we look outside of ourselves,

We will find an uncertain reality of ups and downs.

On such shaky ground hope cannot stand.

But if we can cultivate hope within ourselves,

we will be better able to face the difficulties of this life with courage and resilience.

**(SLOW)** If we can connect to an inner voice of hope  
that is able to answer our inner voices of pain and despair,  
Then we will be better able to persist through this time.

The question of course is how.

With the world as it is,

and knowing that the voice of despair and anguish may be speaking loudly within us,  
how do we cultivate that hope within ourselves?

How do we connect to that voice of hope that is willing to talk back defiantly?

To begin exploring this question,

I turn to the wisdom of the Chassidic Master Rebbe Nachman of Breslov,  
one of our tradition’s greatest teachers about hope and despair.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank my teacher Rabbi David Jaffe for pointing me to this concept in Rabbi Nachman’s writing

For Rebbe Nachman, one of the greatest sources of faith and hope  
Was the fact that there is always change.  
For us to overcome our sense of alienation from faith and hope,  
We must root ourselves in the belief that there is a *M'chadesh*,  
That there is a sacred force for renewal and change in our world  
That underlies all of nature.  
When we connect to this sacred reality of constant change in our lives and in our world,  
This can restore our faith and hope in the future (LM 7:1:3-4).

Now, some of us might find this teaching counterintuitive.  
Some of us fear change. Some of us find constant change destabilizing or exhausting.  
But Rebbe Nachman is urging us to see change differently.  
He is urging us to see our reality of constant change as a source of hope for the future.  
So how could this be? How could change be a source of hope?

Perhaps it is because change means that things will not always be as they are now.  
We tend to look at our present as though it is our enduring reality.  
Especially if our present is difficult, we tend to think that it will always be this way.  
But in truth, change is always happening.  
There is no such thing as the static present.  
The present is always unfolding.

According to Rabbi Feld,  
The Biblical Hebrew language captures this sense of the present well.  
This is because Biblical Hebrew has only two tenses rather than the three we have in English.  
While the English language has the three distinct tenses of past, present, and future,  
Biblical Hebrew has  
The past tense, which describes what has been completed;  
And the present and future tense in one,  
which describes what is in the process of becoming.  
This second tense should be understood as a continuous present,  
Which is attempting to describe a world that is not fixed, that has not fully come into being.  
The implications of this seemingly fine grammar point  
Is that our reality is never static.  
Our reality is constantly changing and unfolding.  
The potential for a better future, for an unexpectedly beautiful future,  
is always possible.

Rebbe Nachman goes on describe what it looks like  
to find hope in this reality of constant change.  
He teaches that when we pray from depths of our heart,  
We can tap into the world's great potential.  
In the reality of *M'Chadesh*, in a world that is constantly becoming,  
Prayer can help us direct our hearts to the potential in creation.

It is not that prayer itself creates change-  
Though of course we do not truly know-  
It is that prayer awakens our wisdom, and opens our hearts to what could be (LM 8:7:3-5).  
For Rebbe Nachman, enlivening within ourselves this sense of potential  
is a deep act of faith and hope.  
It is an act of orienting ourselves to the possibility of a better future,  
Even if the present feels hopeless.  
It is an act of imagining that the world could be otherwise  
Even when the world feels stuck.  
When we make a prayerful connection to the *M'chadesh* underlying our reality,  
to the sacred force for renewal and change in our world,  
We can begin to hear the voice of hope talking back.  
**(SLOW)** When we begin to open our minds and hearts to the world's potential,  
Rooting ourselves in what could be,  
We can begin to cultivate hope and faith within ourselves.

As we consider the power of prayer  
To help us tap into the world's great potential and becoming,  
We return to pray the words of Psalm 27.

The Psalm says:

קוֹיָה אֶל-יְהוָה

We pray to feel the hope embedded within our reality of constant change.

The Psalm says:

וְזִק וְיִאֲמָץ לְבָר

We pray for the strength and courage that comes from connecting to our world's ever-present potential.

And the Psalm ends with another call for hope:

וְקוֹיָה אֶל-יְהוָה

We pray that this hope will accompany us always, through the many ups and downs that change will bring.

As we weather this time of uncertainty together,

My blessing for us is this:

May we see the change we experience as a source of hope.

May we see the great potential within creation.

And may our prayer open our minds and hearts

And help us live into

Our reality's great potential.