



Kol Nidre – 5777
Hope

By Rabbi Howard Lifshitz

Whenever visiting Washington, D.C. I try to visit one of the new monuments, of which there always seems to be another. Recently, the Martin Luther King memorial attracted my attention. Its centerpiece is a large granite mound out of which a slice has been cut and moved forward. On this one small section is a 30-foot sculpture of King and the engraved words, “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.” Certainly King during his life time taught his followers that beyond the darkness of despair was the light of the hope for a better future and of the dream of freedom actually realized

These words reminded me of the Prophet Jeremiah. At one of bleakest moments of Jewish history with the temple destroyed, the nation devastated by destruction and death, and the people exiled to Babylonia, our ancestors must have thought that Adonai Himself had been defeated and that Israel was doomed to disappear from the world. But it was at precisely that moment of great despair that he proclaimed, “*yesh tikvah l'ach-á-ree-taych* Jer. 31:17— There is hope for your future and your children will return to their land.” And we know that *that* hope, though delayed, *was* realized, and our people did return to its land.

Today there is much that might leave us uneasy, even frightened.

Fifteen years after 9/11, terrorism remains a constant threat and lone wolf terrorists strike in our cities. The Middle East remains a dangerous place. The plight of innocent civilians being brutalized and of refugees fleeing civil war revolts us while the democracies fail to act forcefully enough to bring an end to the carnage. The intentions of Russia continue to be troubling. The clashes between our police and our citizens become more frequent. Popular heroes in sports and entertainment have fallen and banking scandals still come to light. This year's presidential campaign is bizarre and bewildering. There surely is reason enough to despair.

In more personal areas, worries also abound. Who has not worried about having their computer, credit cards or personal identity being compromised? The realm of privacy continues to shrink. Accidents, missed opportunities, misfortune, illness, disappointment or depression, can render us numb. Probably most of us, at some time, have — I know I have — felt as if we could not get out of bed or face our daily responsibilities. *If* we are fortunate enough to have a spouse, or friend or perhaps a rabbi, who can remind us that in the past we have successfully overcome difficult challenges, *if* there is an individual who can gently point out positive experiences we have had in past while encouraging us to be mindful of future special occasions to which we can look forward, *if* there is someone who can reassure us that there is reason to be hopeful — *then* we may better weather the present darkness and believe that there will be brighter tomorrows. Our confidence in our inner resources, in our strength and in our capacity to live meaningfully

will be increased. Then we too will hear and heed Jeremiah's message that "There is hope for the future."

But hope alone is not enough.

At a recent exhibit of photographs by Robert Parks there was a picture taken at a psychiatric clinic in Harlem in the 1940's that had a caption that struck me. It read: The aim [of the clinic] is "to transform despair not into hope, but into determination." What the therapists there likely believed, and what Dr. King and the prophet Jeremiah certainly knew, was that hope was necessary, but not sufficient; that hope is passive, while determination is active. Hope may leave us waiting for others to solve our problems, but determination energizes us to act in ways that lift us out of our doldrums and that change our situation.

Among us today are some whose worries are great, whose sorrows are deep, and whose fears are daunting. Others may feel unfulfilled and lonely, without direction or purpose. Overworked and over scheduled, never disconnected from the internet and computer, juggling a host of responsibilities, many are too exhausted to enjoy what is around us. Faced with ailments, with the death of a loved one, by various crises in our relationships, buffeted by economic concerns, or overwhelmed with too many choices to make and too many limitations upon us, we are so enervated that a heavy angst increasingly leads us to turn inward and to shut down. Certainly those who feel this way for any length of time should seek professional help and, when appropriate, obtain the relief that therapy and medication can provide.

But always we should remember that when hope is linked with determination we are more likely to transcend uncertainty, to persevere in spite of perceived danger, and to act as if the future is bright rather than dark. Similarly, those who are presently contented and untroubled should also understand that hope and determination together can move any of us to greater engagement with those around us and bring us added satisfaction and greater joy.

From where can we all derive such hope and determination? From whence can we find the motivation and courage to act in new ways that will increase the meaning, direction and spirit in our lives? From what source can we nourish our spirits so as to renew our days, so as to become more vital, and more enchanted with possibilities that are before us?

One answer was given by the great sage Hillel who taught "Al tifrosh min ha-tzibur—Don't separate yourself from the community." I believe he was saying much more than not to be a hermit. His words are an affirmation that there is strength in being part of a community and that there is a positive effect that connecting with others has for both the individual and the community. Yes, the community is enhanced when people join it; but it also true that in joining with others, we ourselves benefit. Establishing new or deeper personal relationships and serving a greater good beyond ourselves, often can have an uplifting impact, can change us for the better, and can improve our perspective on the world.

I've seen that, for example, among those who are saying kaddish. At first, coming to the minyan may be burdensome and awkward. But as time passes, the mourner becomes comfortable, understands that he or she is not alone and is soon able to offer consolation and

support to others. In doing this he eases that other individual's pain and discovers that his own outlook improves. Likewise, one who survives serious illness and then dedicates herself to helping others finds her own spirit uplifted.

When determination leads us to help others or to involve ourselves with efforts to strengthen a community or make a contribution to society, we view ourselves differently. In addition to affecting others, such behavior soon provides us with more purpose, we discern that there is a richer texture to our life, and we feel more vital than before. It causes us to feel better about who we are and about the way we are living.

If we visit those who are home bound, our own problems may seem less overwhelming. Sitting with those brought low by grief, we may cherish more the days we have, whether they be few or many. Join a synagogue committee or participate in the good work of our Sisterhood and Mens Club. Become a regular at the synagogue. Pray here. Study here. Contribute here. Socialize and connect with others here. Your presence will touch the people around you and, simultaneously, you will find yourself stimulated, revived and changed .

Getting out of our comfort zone, we can volunteer to take more active roles in charitable or communal causes. We can be more active participants in politics or government. We can be social activists or helping hands. Doing these things reinforces our awareness that we do have the power to alter lives and to improve society. When we act in these ways, we will think far more positively about our own life and become more attuned to what makes for meaningful living .

While the High Holidays ask us to turn inward to consider the nature of our lives, they also encourage us to open wider the window of our hearts to better respond to the world around us, to see more clearly how our deeds impact others, and to recognize within all our fellows the spark of God. By our involvement with them, by acting on their behalf, by giving of ourselves to raise them up, by connecting with our community and strengthening it, we cause the flame of God's spirit to glow more brightly in our world. That in turn lifts us up, renews our faith in the substance and significance of our own behavior, and reassures us that we do have an important role to play in the Lord's plan.

May our prayers lead us to affirm yesh tikvah, there is hope, purpose, and meaning to our lives. May our worship help us to recall that God has faith in our ability to be His agents, that He believes in our power to reshape our individual lives, and this world, with hope and determination and deeds. And since He has such confidence in us, let us also have the same confidence in our own ability to multiply goodness and blessing in this world.. Then, with hope and determination and our actions, this new year will be one of meaning and blessing for us and for our all our families.

Amen