

*There is Breath Within the Pain:
Becoming Hope in the Midst of Despair
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Rosh Hashanah 5785*

I have started this sermon many times.

What is the message?

What is in my heart that I want to share?

What do people need to hear? Want to hear?

What can be helpful this Rosh Hashanah?

What can I say that has not been said?

And perhaps the hardest questions of all, how can we celebrate joyfully this New Year, after such a difficult one.

I will be honest with you. This was my hardest year as a rabbi. With a broken heart and at times challenged to find hope and believe *we* will be ok.

We, I mean, the Jewish people,

We, I mean, humanity,

We, I mean... me, personally.

This past year, I have had a hard time knowing how to lead, how to hold our community, how to walk this path with you. Some of you look to me – to us rabbis – for wisdom and assurance that everything will be ok. Some look to us spiritual leaders to uplift your hearts joyfully, regardless of the situation of the world around us. Some would prefer leaders who don't share how broken we are feeling.

So, here I am, this Rosh Hashanah, standing before you, first and foremost asking for your forgiveness – for not knowing at all times how to lead or respond to the needs of our community, in the ways that each of you have needed. The work of the world is messy. The work of spiritual leadership is messy, too.

I want to offer today some of what is in my heart in this time of despair. As Mary Oliver says: “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine”¹

And, if I am allowing myself to be fully honest, I will share that the atrocities of October 7th opened in me a wound that has been open, but dormant, for 30 years since my mother was killed in a terrorist attack. Not a surprise of course, will say the therapists in the room. But beyond the wound of my own trauma, I have been thinking a lot about why, after thirty years of holding optimism, hope, and joy in my worldview — despite my own loss — it all feels so much harder now.

Why? What is different this year?

Perhaps what has made this year so difficult is that often we have been asked to make a choice regarding whose pain matters most; and who is most deserving of our grief. We have witnessed how easy it is to dehumanize one side for the sake of humanizing another.

But this is an illusion – this idea that who we care for is a zero-sum game.

The truth is, dehumanizing those we consider “other” does nothing to help the ones we love. It’s a dangerous path, the willingness to regard others as less human. When we set off down this path, we succeed only in dehumanizing ourselves. We divorce ourselves from part of our humanity, from our spark of divinity.

That is surely something hope cannot survive.

Only by mending such brokenness inside us can we be fit to help mend the brokenness outside.

Only then, perhaps, may we be worthy of hope.

But who says we are obligated to feel hope in this moment? Just because we have been trained to come up with answers and to have hope? To be optimistic? What if, at this time, what we need is to learn to embrace the pain, allow ourselves to feel despair? To breathe within the pain.

¹ Wild Geese
*There is Breath within the Pain:
Becoming Hope in the midst of Despair*

In the words of Israeli author David Grossman:

יש נשימה בתוך הכאב
יש נשימה²

There is breath within the pain.
There is breath,

In the book of *Kohélet*, Ecclesiastes,³ we read verses that are known to many of us through the song by Pete Seeger:

To everything
There is a season
And a time to every purpose under heaven
A time to be born, a time to die
A time to plant, a time to reap
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep

These words recognize that all these experiences have been with us throughout history. They also suggest that at each time it is possible to experience only one thing. Either to hate or to love, either to dance or to mourn, either to make war or to make peace.

The great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, in his poem *אדם בחייו* - A person in their life,⁴ challenges the Book of Ecclesiastes. Saying that a person doesn't have time in their life to experience everything separately. A person needs to love and hate at the same moment, and laugh and cry with the same eyes, and with the same hands throw stones and gather them. And to hate, and forgive and remember and forget. All at the same time, says Amichai.

At first, when re-encountering this poem this year, a few months ago, it felt right, it felt like an important aspiration and goal. A kind of calling to find beauty in darkness,

² Falling Out of Times

³ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/poetry/a-man-in-his-life/>

possibility and hope in despair. So for a moment, I decided that Amichai was right, not Ecclesiastes.... And then I reconsidered: Is that true?

Perhaps Amichai is not right? Perhaps what Ecclesiastes is trying to teach us is that it is ok to fully embrace one experience or emotion, even, even if it is total darkness. The message of Ecclesiastes is that nothing is permanent – no feeling and no circumstance. Not war, not despair, not hate At some point it will turn, and transform to something new and different. But while we are in it, we can fully submerge.

And then it occurred to me, maybe that is what hope is really about? Not about the certainty of knowing it will be ok. But simply: the opposite of being paralyzed. Hope may come from the simple act of noticing, noticing that we continue to breathe within the pain.

David Grossman writes that hope “contains a verb that propels it into the future. Always to the future. Always with forward motion.” He goes on, “When we dare to hope, we are proving that there is still one place in our soul where we are free.”⁵

Rebecca Solnit echoes this idea of hope as a verb. She writes:

“Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky... hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency... Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope.”⁶

“Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope.”

But what might this action look like for us now, in the midst of so much uncertainty?

The Talmud⁷ tells us that after the Temple was destroyed a second time, there was an increase in the number of Jews who stopped eating meat and drinking wine. They were so consumed by their grief that they wanted to simply survive with minimal provisions, as each of the provisions reminded them of another ritual in the Temple.

⁵ [Article in Haaretz newspaper](#), October 31, 2020

⁶ Hope in the Dark: The Untold History of People Power

⁷ Baba Batra 60b

There is Breath within the Pain:

Becoming Hope in the midst of Despair

Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

Rosh Hashanah 5785

If they could survive without meat or wine, what about surviving without bread? Or fruit? Or even water?

Rabbi Yehoshua helps them understand that their fervent commitment to their grief would lead them to stop living, literally. If they became stuck in feeling *only* grief, they would die.

But Rabbi Yehoshua understands that it is equally impossible for them to *not* feel grief. And, at this very dark time, he proposes a path forward. He says: My children, come, and I will tell you how we should act. To not mourn at all is impossible... But to mourn excessively as you are doing is also impossible... Rather, this is what the Sages said: A person may plaster his house with plaster, but he must leave over a small amount in it without plaster to remember the destruction of the Temple. This is a practice that some still follow.

Rabbi Yehoshua perhaps stands in the middle, as a bridge between *Kobelet* and *Amichai*. He doesn't hurry the people to move on from their grief. At the same time, he recognizes the danger of becoming stuck in feeling nothing *but* grief. He tells them they have to find a way to do both, to honor both grief *and* life.

But what does it mean to grieve and live?

What does that look like?

How can we possibly be big enough and strong enough to carry not only our own pain, but the world's pain, too?

Isn't it easier to become numb?

Or succumb to constant pain, be swallowed by hopelessness?

I think of Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the mother of murdered Israeli hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin ז"ל. Even in the face of unfathomable despair, she did not give up hope. Her resilience and determination are beyond words. Our Hartman Fellowship group had a chance to meet with her this summer and, when asked how it is that she keeps going, she responded clearly: Hope is mandatory. And even after Hersh was murdered, in her piercing words to her son at his funeral she asked *him* to shine a light on her and her family to be able to rise again. Quoting her powerful words:

*There is Breath within the Pain:
Becoming Hope in the midst of Despair*

*Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Rosh Hashanah 5785*

“Now, my Hersh, I ask for your help. As we transform our hope into grief and this new unknown brand of pain, I beg of you, please do what you can to have your light shine down on me, Dada, Leebie and Orly. Help shower us with healing and resilience. Help us to rise again. I know it will take a long time, but please may God bless us that one day, one fine day, Dada, Leebie, Orly and I will hear laughter, and we will turn around and see... that it’s us. And that we are ok. You will always be with us as a force of love and vitality, you will become our superpower.”⁸

So how do we allow ourselves to grieve, to sit in the fullness of our grief, and still find our way back to hope (even if it takes a while)?

Our tradition offers some important tools that can help. Every year during the High Holiday season, we are reminded of these same three tools when we chant:

"וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וְצְדָקָה מְעַבְרִין אֶת רַע הַגְּזֵרָה"

“*Utshuva, ut’filah, utz’dakah* (repentance, prayer or worship and charity) can **avert** the severity of the decree”

It is important to note that the original words of *Unetaneh Tokef* found in the Jerusalem Talmud, are different from the ones we chant.

In the original we read:

"אָמַר רַבִּי לְעֶזְרָא. שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים מְבַטְלִין אֶת הַגְּזֵרָה קִשְׁוָה. וְאֵילּוּ הֵן. תְּפִלָּה וְצְדָקָה וּתְשׁוּבָה"⁹

“Rabbi Eleazar said, three things **annul** the harsh decree: They are: prayer, charity (tzedaka) and repentance.”

The original uses the word *mevatlin*, annul or cancel: Three things *cancel* a harsh decree.

⁸ Eulogy for Hersh Goldberg-Polin <https://www.timesofisrael.com/my-sweet-boy-hersh-we-tried-so-desperately-to-save-you/>

⁹ Jerusalem Talmud, Ta’anit 2:1

There is Breath within the Pain:

Becoming Hope in the midst of Despair

Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

Rosh Hashanah 5785

Why did the poet who wrote the *unetaneh tokef* replace “cancel” with “avert”? Maybe he knew that it’s not possible to cancel out all harshness, no matter how much we might wish we could. Maybe, in his alteration, he actually winds up offering us something more consoling, if only because it is more attainable: the notion that even though we cannot always change reality, there are things we can do to help us cope with life’s harshness.

So what are these three tools that can avert the severity of the decree?

The first is ***tshuva*: repentance or return.** *Tshuva* asserts that there is no such thing as: “this is just the way things are.” *Tshuva* is the belief that we can change and that others can change. *Tshuva* is the belief that nothing is permanent. *Tshuva* says we do not have to be the same as we were. The world can be different. *Tshuva* says, we believe in change.

There is a time for everything and we can help turn around the times.

The second tool is ***t'filah*: prayer.** Prayer is a practice that allows each of us to connect with ourselves and with the Divine, honestly and authentically. Prayer allows us to articulate our fears and our joys. Prayer is a daring act of imagination. Norman Fischer teaches us that “Imagination isn’t an escape from reality. Imagination deepens and enriches reality, adding texture, depth, dimension, feeling, and possibility.”¹⁰ And that is what Prayer can be.

The words of Psalm 30 have carried me this past year, and in a way, by choosing it to be our TBZ High Holiday song, I wanted to share it as words that can carry us as a community.

אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה אֶקְרָא

To You, Adonai, I call

The psalm recognizes the experience of fear and mourning, and prays for the possibility and capacity to turn our mourning into joy and dance. Each verse we are

¹⁰ “The World Could be Otherwise; Imagination and the Bodhisattva Path”

singing allows us to tap into the possibility of embracing the pain and imagining the joy that can become.

Through prayer, we allow ourselves to be alive, to accept the mystery of life, and perhaps even to hope. When we pray we have the opportunity to imagine that everything is possible. It is a daring moment that can turn reality around.

Finally, the third tool is **Tzedakah**: The act of caring for other human beings and for ourselves is rooted in justice. *Tzedakah* is what reminds us to be human in a world that too often loses its humanity. *Tzedakah* is generosity and compassion. *Tzedakah* is giving. *Tzedakah* is also an act of hope that commits us to create and build societies where people take seriously our responsibility to care for each other.

Utshuva, ut'filah, utz'dakah: These are the concrete tools that allow us to dare to imagine the future. With these tools, hope becomes not a mere feeling or longing, but a commitment, a verb, a way of moving forward.

Can we do this for one another right now?

Can we make space for grief and despair, *even as* we once again pick up the tools of *teshuvah, tefillah* and *tzedakah*?

Can we fiercely love and care for our community *even as* we acknowledge our humanity is contingent on recognizing the humanity of others?

Can we allow ourselves to feel pain *even as* we pay attention to the breath within it?

These are all practices.

So much of what happens in life, we don't get to choose. But we do get to choose which practices we'll use to live through our experience. And maybe, just maybe, through the act of practicing together, we *become* the hope that our world desperately needs.

Shana Tova.

*There is Breath within the Pain:
Becoming Hope in the midst of Despair*

Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Rosh Hashanah 5785