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The Riverway Project // Temple Israel of Boston
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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5785 - Stuck Like a Dope with a Thing Called Hope¹

“When the sky is a bright canary yellow,
I forget every cloud I’ve ever seen.
So they call me a cockeyed optimist,
Immature, and incurably green.”

These words were written by the prolific and brilliant Jewish lyricist,
Oscar Hammerstein II,
for his iconic 1949 musical, “South Pacific.”

Those of you who know me know that I’m a huge musical theater nerd and those
of you who *really* know me know how much I love the standards,
the old classics,
musicals from what some call “The Golden Age of Broadway.”

From the final years of WWII and in the decade following,
American creativity thrived,
delivering musicals with immense heart and tremendous **hope**,
offering a respite from the hellscape of war and its aftershocks.

¹ <https://rodgersandhammerstein.com/song/south-pacific/a-cockeyed-optimist/>

I know I'm from the wrong generation but these musicals make me happy. -
Richard Rodgers,
Irving Berlin,
Frank Loesser,
these composers
(all Jews by the way)
wrote music that surged with joy and possibility.

It's sort of corny but I'm sort of corny so it's a good fit.

I've always resonated with this optimism,
I've always seen myself as a glass-half-full person,
a generally joyful person.

I've always felt pride in my ability to see possibilities where others do not.

And then this past year arrived.

And it truly found a way to beat me down.

We are here tonight to say goodbye to one of the most difficult years of our lives.

The challenges of this past year,
the violence,
the hatred,
the division -
it breeds a despair that has felt overwhelming.

And I bet you have felt it too.

Immediately after the High Holiday cycle last year,
the Jewish people experienced the most deadly attack since the Holocaust with
the atrocities of October 7.

The 361 days since have felt unbearably difficult -
bringing unimaginable suffering,
trauma,
and loss of life to an already volatile region of the world,
bringing divisive rhetoric that destroyed families and friendships,
bringing a very present fear for our physical and emotional safety,
and leading to a record rise in antisemitism like nothing I thought possible in my
lifetime.

Not to mention,
peace seems more elusive than ever,
as each day heightens the conflict and radicalization runs rampant.

Maybe you came to synagogue tonight,
on this first night of the new Jewish year,
hoping that your rabbi might have the answer for how we can get this finally
resolved,
how we can finally awaken from the collective nightmare of October 7th that
seems to never end.

I'm sorry to disappoint you and say that I don't have the answers.

And I so wish I did.

What I can say is that I know how it feels to be a Jew in this world today.

No matter where you are on the political spectrum,
it has not been an easy time to be Jewish.

And I'm with you in your grief.

I'm with you in your fear.

I may not have the answers but I find comfort in the realization that Judaism has never actually been about answers,
but rather about living in the uncertainty itself.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks taught that "Judaism is a sustained struggle,
the greatest ever known,
against the world that is,
in the name of the world that could be,
should be,
but is not yet."²

He taught that "to be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially
threatened by despair."³

*The Jewish way is to not know **the** answer but to somehow hold onto the certainty
of hope, amidst a multiplicity of **possible** answers.*

**So,
in this moment,
I admit that I don't know how to solve this crisis.**

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-the-jewish-people-invented-hope/>

³ *ibid.*

Right now,
I actually don't see a clear way out that will ensure safety,
security,
dignity,
and equality for all people living in the Holy Land.

And that feels terrifying to admit.

**But from this pit,
min hameitzar,
from this narrow place,
we channel our ancestors' hope and somehow access a belief that this can get
better.**

**The hope we seek now is the same hope that our ancestors held -
a hope that is holy,
transcending time and space.**

**In the moments when we struggle the most to feel hope,
we reach back and access the hope our ancestors held in *their* hearts and let
that move us forward.**

Let me be clear -
hope does not replace action.

We don't absolve ourselves of actively fighting for peace and justice,
of using our political and legislative power to help build the world as we know it
can be.

Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman taught that we should "Pray as if everything depended
on God[, and] act as if everything depended on you."⁴

⁴ Mishkan T'filah, p. 165

It's a both/and approach.

But I can assure you that nothing will change if we don't actually believe it can.

I'm not a politician.

I'm not a strategist.

I'm a rabbi.

I am in the business of the soul.

And this is what I know:

**hope is a gift,
and a powerful tool at our disposal.**

**When we face these moments in our lives that feel unimaginably unsolvable and catastrophic,
hope is not a dismissal of reality,
it's not a wishy-washy position.**

It's hard work and it's worth doing.

We have no choice but to believe it is possible to find peace.

Somehow,
despite everything I see around me,
I cannot relinquish the hope that it can get better,
that the Jewish people can once again feel a sense of emotional and physical security.

I cannot relinquish the hope that it is possible for Israel to live up to the vision laid out by its Declaration of Independence which imagines that this fledgling nation “will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel;

it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.”⁵

Even in the face of the nightmare playing out before our eyes, I will not let go of the hope of Israel one day living up to this vision.

I will not let go of the miracle that there is actually a Jewish nation on this earth, a dedicated place on the map for Jewish refugees and asylum seekers to go, something that my ancestors dreamed of but couldn't have actually imagined coming to fruition.

⁵ https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/israel.asp

Even now,
even in the midst of war and suffering,
or rather *especially now*,
the least Jewish thing we could do would be to relinquish hope,
to release the vision that our ancestors entrusted to us -
a place on the map where Jews of all backgrounds and ethnicities and practices
can thrive,
where Judaism itself can bloom,
where liberal Judaism could thrive,
where equality could thrive,
where Muslims and Christians can pray and have equal rights alongside their
Jewish neighbors.

The word “Zionism” holds so much baggage and means so many different things
to different people.

But,
at its core,
it represents a belief I hold deep in my bones,
the belief that a people have the right to control their own destiny,
that **a people have a right to self-determination and that the Jews are not an
exception.**

I won't relinquish this belief,
nor will I relinquish my belief that **if** it applies to Jews,
then it also must apply to Palestinians who **equally** deserve to live in dignity and
safety,
who equally deserve to see their children live long,
free,
beautiful lives.

I won't relinquish my belief in democracy,
and equality,
and freedom -
both in Israel and in America.

I don't know how we get from here to there.

As I said,
I'm not a strategist,
I'm not an ambassador.

**I'm a rabbi and I'm a Jew who loves my people and who loves my ancestral
homeland.**

Not having the political answer does not mean we don't need to pay attention to
the politics.

It means we need to follow the lead of the people in the land,
on the ground.

It means we need to listen to and follow the lead of Israelis who love their state,
who fight against any corrupt political leader who doesn't have a serious
commitment to peace.

It means we need to follow the lead of Israelis who hold fast to the vision of what Israel could be,
who are,
as Pirkei Avot teaches,
“like the disciples of Aaron,
Ohev Shalom v'Rodef Shalom,
loving peace and pursuing peace.”⁶

It means we follow the lead of the Israelis and Palestinians who understand that the other is not going anywhere,
that our destinies are tied up in each other's.

It is the job of our strategists and elected officials to figure out the policies to get there,
and to follow the lead of those stakeholders who advocate for crucial systemic change.

***Our job is not to lose the vision,
Not to lose the hope,
ha'tikvah,
that it could come true.***

And so we hold on.

We hold on to hope even when we're not sure we have reason to do so.

**We find hope because of this one simple truth:
somehow,
by some unimaginable twist of fate,
the Jewish people are still here.**

⁶ Pirkei Avot 1:13

We have the tools to keep this vision alive:

we have our inheritance,
our heritage,
the mettle of our ancestors,
the hopes and dreams of a people who were forced to find wholeness and weave themselves amidst a world desperate to strip them bare.

We find our uniqueness through memory,
through a remembrance of people whose names we'll never know,
whose traits are indelibly imprinted in our faces,
our bodies,
our souls.

We walk the path of survivors.

**We live with hearts that pump their blood,
voices unmistakably infused with their inflections.**

We collectively have been here before,
even if *we personally* have never been here before.

Our path is lit by their example,
by their actions,
by their guidance.

**Their souls are in our souls and they survived expulsions and inquisitions and a
Holocaust and yet against all odds,
we are still here tonight doing something that people have been trying to stop
us from doing for literally thousands of years.**

But,
nevertheless,
here we are.

I understand that we are entering this year saddled by fear.

I understand that we are entering this year saddled by despair.

The news is unbearable.

I recognize the incredible uncertainty that lies ahead in 5785,
for Israelis,
Palestinians,
and Americans alike.

But in that uncertainty lies possibility -
the future is not yet decided and the uncertainty leaves room for hope.

Even now,
especially now,
especially in the spiritual place our Psalmists called *gei tzalmavet*,
a valley of deepest darkness,⁷
we have no other choice but to cling to hope if we want to survive.

Giving up on the dream of peace is not an option.

“For if dreams die,”
Langston Hughes once wrote,
“life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.”⁸

⁷ Psalms 23:4

⁸ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/150995/dreams-5d767850da976>

Our hopes and our dreams for a better future are the constants that have allowed us to survive this far, and they are the reason we find ourselves here tonight.

**And so we keep moving forward,
and we will never disappear.**

Oscar Hammerstein's lyric from South Pacific concludes:

"I could say life is just a bowl of jello //
and appear more intelligent and smart //
but I'm stuck like a dope //
with a thing called hope, //
and I can't get it out of my heart. //
Not this heart."

I know.

It's corny.

But Americans needed lyrics like this in the years surrounding the Second World War and I would argue that we need them desperately today.

We do not have the luxury of getting hope out of our hearts.

Not these hearts.

Not any year, but certainly not this year.

May we never forget that our collective story has always been one where the impossible somehow becomes possible.

May it happen for us once again,
bimheira v'yameinu,
speedily and in our days.

And let us say,
Amen.