

The Future is Dark and Thus Full of Hope

R. Suzie Jacobson, Rosh Hashannah 5785

Today we wish each other a good year, a sweet year, a year filled with health and happiness. Today we assert that our repentance, prayer, and charity have the power to sway God's mighty decree. We can change our future!

But, let's be honest, folks. This year, walking into the high holidays, our world is not all apples and honey.

Let's name the elephant on the bima. This year was an awful year for the Jewish people. Sure, there have been worse years - 1492, 1942 - but leaving aside the suffering olympics, I think perhaps the only thing we might all truly agree on is that this year was a heartbreaking, traumatizing, confusing, and terrifying year.

In four days it will be October 7th. It will be an entire year since Hamas attacked Israel - and there are still dozens of hostages imprisoned in Gaza, hundreds of thousands of people displaced from their homes, and tens of thousands dead - Israeli, Palestinian, and Lebanese. It is hard to wish one another a sweet year, when there is so much violence, uncertainty, and pain.

Internationally and here at home, new acts of antisemitism are perpetrated constantly, on the right *and* on the left, in schools and from candidates for president. Many Jews

are nervous to wear their stars of David in public, for fear of being targeted or blamed for Israel's military actions.

It is hard to be with family members and friends with whom we disagree. Ideological rifts have appeared in close knit families, and some Jewish communities have been torn apart by infighting and disagreement.

“To destroy a life is to destroy a world” - we have lost more than our sense of unity this year. We have lost entire worlds, universes, galaxies of human potential. How do we move into a new year, wishing each other sweetness when we carry such loss? How do we move ourselves into the future, when our hearts are full of anxiety and despair?

On January 18, 1915, author Virginia Woolf wrote: “The future is dark, which **is** on the whole, the best thing the future can be.”¹

On that day, Europe was nearly six months into the First World War and just weeks away from both the first aerial bombings on civilian populations and the introduction of poison gas on the Western Front. Woolf herself, at 33 years old, was nearly six months past a suicide attempt, surrounded by nurses and mired in the mental illness which would grip her for life.

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¹1. Virginia Woolf et al., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Volume 1, 1915-19* (London: Granta Books, 2023).

With all that going on, you've got to wonder, how can a dark future be the best thing?

But Woolf is not using "dark" to mean bad or painful. Rather, darkness is inscrutable. She means dark as in unknown, dark is mysterious. The future is dark because it has not yet arrived. It is dark because we do not know what it holds.

The unknowable future can be a terrifying prospect. Humans fear the unknown, the unseeable, the unpredictable. When our present is unbearable, when war and violence, illness and loss permeate our communities, it is easy to be cynical and understand our pain as prophecy.

And yet, Woolf does not view the dark, unknown future as terrifying - the future isn't here yet - anything can happen. The future is pregnant with possibility.

There is darkness ahead of us to be sure, but we must remember that from the primordial darkness, God created all that is. From *tohu va'vohu*² - confusion and chaos, a swirling, impenetrable darkness, God said "let there be light" and everything came into being.

The darkness of *tohu va'vohu* was not evil, it was not something to be conquered or destroyed to make way for creation. Creation was an act of *havdallah*, "separation and

² Genesis 1:2

distinction³ - all future life was born from this darkness. The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra emphasizes that “*bara*,” God’s creating, was not the making of something from nothing - instead it was the fashioning of chaos and darkness into an ordered world.

When we look in the primordial rear view mirror, we can recognize that we come from a darkness full of possibility, and when we look forward beyond ourselves, we can see that same darkness.

There are several ways to approach our dark future.

We can be cynical and pessimistic, allowing our fears and anxieties, our fixed assumptions about our present situation to predict a bleak future. We can fill the darkness with our prophecies of doom.

Or we can be passively optimistic - we can understand progress as inevitable. We can avoid the complexities of our era with the false certainty that “all’s well that ends well.”

The pessimist sees that humanity has always been embroiled in hatred and violence; it is inevitable and it will continue.

³ Leo Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Green (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 359–376.

The optimist sees that we live better today than any previous generation. We have antibiotics and surgical innovations, and energy efficiency! The optimist predicts that everything will be just fine.

Pessimism leads us to anxiety, depression, demoralization, and justified violence. Optimism, to naivete, moral blindness, stupidity, and apathy.

Both ultimately minimize personal agency and responsibility for our shared future. If we are frozen in our panic, or lost in our dreams, we will inevitably see ourselves as objects, tossed about on the sea of history.

“The future is dark”, *and* there has to be a better way to face what is coming.

We can choose how we face the future. But the choice is not binary.

Author Rebecca Solnit proposes an alternative. She believes we must approach our dark, unknown future with hope.

Solnit writes in her book “Hope in the Dark,”

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes - you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is the

embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists.⁴

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The recognition of uncertainty gives us the power to act. We see that no matter what has befallen us or our communities, there is always possibility. There are ideas we have not imagined, solutions not yet invented, and priorities not yet established. There are two unshakable truths of humanity - we were born and we will someday die. But as long as our hearts beat and our lungs breath and our feet move, there is hope to create the world we desire.

Hope is common, but it is not an easy choice - it is Emily Dickenson’s “thing with feathers.”⁵ It has been discussed, debated, and defined by philosophers, artists, scholars, and politicians of every culture and era.

And it is also ours. Hope is the theological and spiritual foundation of the Jewish people.

When at the burning bush, Moses asks God to share their name, God cryptically says “*Eyheh asher Eyheh*.” Translated with an attention to verb tense - God is saying, “I will be what I will be.” God is a God of the future. A God of becoming, not a God stagnant or fixed in history. A God who compels us to reach beyond the present. God is possibility.

⁴ 1. Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016), xiv.

⁵ Dickinson, Emily (1999). Franklin, R. W. (ed.). *The poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks⁶ points out that the entire structure of our Torah goes against the common practice of giving a story an ending. Instead, our stories end with ellipses, punctuation shorthand for “there is more to come.”

While Abraham is promised the land of Israel, his only acquisition is the burial place for his wife Sarah. He is promised that his descendants will be numerous, and yet his book ends with his family in exile. Genesis ends with unfulfilled promises.

Moses, our great leader, spends 40 years wandering in the wilderness, finally dying on Mount Nebo, overlooking the land he spent his lifetime searching for. Deuteronomy ends with unfulfilled promises.

At the end of the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites are in exile in Babylonia⁷, having just been given permission by Cyrus to return to their land. The entire Bible ends with unfilled promise, the future uncertain and yet full of hope.

These literary ellipses are not a coincidence, they are not pessimism or a lack of imagination; they represent the heart of what it means to be a Jew. The fine print of God’s covenant has not been realized, but the future is unfolding. In the words of British-Israeli author Harold Fisch, the Jewish narrative is “the unappeased memory of a future still to be fulfilled.”⁸

⁶ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-the-jewish-people-invented-hope/>

⁷ 2 Chronicles 36:23

⁸ Harold Fisch, *A Remembered Future: A Study in Literary Mythology* [Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984], p. 94

Theologically, this can be felt most strongly in the Jewish idea of the messiah, the herald of peace and true redemption on earth. Our Jewish golden age is always imagined to be in the future. To be a Jew is to reply to the question “Has the messiah come?” with the words “Not yet.”

Early Reform Jews rejected the idea that we are waiting around for some person to show up and bring about peace on earth. Instead, they advocated an ethical monotheism that teaches that each of us has a role to play in *tikkun ha-olam*, repairing the world.

For Reform Jews, our spiritual core is rooted in a different question - “Is there world peace and universal justice?”... “Not yet.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches us that “Judaism is the voice of hope in the conversation of mankind.”⁹

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world convinced of the rationality of despair.

Hope has been our people’s companion in every century, in every country, during the darkest, most uncertain moments. With every new commentary written, new organization founded, new philosophy expounded, the Jewish people have found hope in the darkness, creativity in the face of destruction.

⁹ <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/together-we-are-the-worlds-voice-of-hope/>

And now, the future is dark. But it is not a time to wring our hands or put our heads in the sand. It is not the time for demoralization or apathy. We are called upon to continue down the path of our ancestors, who despite historical victimhood managed to survive, remain creative, resilient and strong. It's our turn to discover the new ideas, new alliances and new orientations that will create a future markedly different from our present.

Though antisemitism is everywhere - culturally and in the hearts and minds of far too many, we are not powerless. We must recognize that unlike our ancestors, antisemitism at the moment is not state sanctioned. It is a crime to act on one's bias. I'll leave the details to the lawyers among us. What I am most concerned about is how we represent and advocate for Jews and Judaism in the disparate communities we engage with.

We must ensure that the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives in our workplaces and schools include training and systems of accountability regarding antisemitism.

And we must build relationships with non Jewish allies. Racism is only addressed when white people join BIPOC communities to ensure justice; sexism is overcome when men stand with women to demand equity. We must hold our non Jewish allies accountable when we face antisemitic tropes, speech, discrimination, and violence. We cannot - we should not - fight this battle alone.

After the antisemitic rally in Charlottesville in 2017, this sanctuary was standing room only. It was filled with our members *and* our allies. And yet, I know many of us did not feel the same outpouring of support after October 7th. Yes, there were stories of deep love and connection, but many were met with silence. We have to fight the cynical urge to throw up our hands and declare ourselves mistreated. We must continue strengthening relationships and demanding accountability. Rather than dissociation, this is a moment to engage.

None of us knows the future for the state of Israel, and today we have every reason to be worried. However, we must push against the urge to despair, or alternatively, disengage. It is a moment for hope - the active intellectual, moral, spiritual, and yes, Jewish, resistance to crisis.

A few days ago, I received an email from my friends, Rabbis Na'ama Dafni Kellen and Gabby Dagan of Or Chadash synagogue in Haifa. I expected to read an anxious message. Instead, they sent me and many others a ritual. Usually we make havdallah to mark the end of holy time. This year, they suggest that we make havdallah at the *beginning* of Rosh Hashannah. They invite us to say:

"Blessed are You, Adonai our God, King of the universe, who distinguishes between darkness and light, between sorrow and joy, between mourning and festivity, between chaos and 'Let there be light', between captivity and distress to freedom and liberty,

between wandering and a secure home, between the year 5784 and the year 5785,
between a year of destruction and war to a year of repair and peace.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who renews the times."

This rejection of pessimism invites us to walk into the new year with hope for peace.

Their words stun and inspire me.

I spoke to Na'ama Tuesday morning - she was in lockdown with her children and attempting to prepare for Rosh Hashannah. As we were hanging up, Na'ama said to me - "I don't just want a better year. I want a good year. I believe in that." Can we join her in this prayer?

In a few moments, we will rise for the *U'netaneh Tokef* prayer:

We will say:

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed -

how many shall pass away and how many shall be born,

who shall live and who shall die..

who shall be at peace and who pursued,

who shall be serene and who tormented

We recognize that anything can happen this year. The future is dark.

But the prayer does not end here.

Instead we end with these words:

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וְצִדְקָה מְעַבְרִין אֶת רַע הַגְּזֵרָה

“Repentance, prayer and justice avert the severity of the decree.”

Repentance, our ability to change

Prayer, which leads to inner wholeness and strength

Justice, the large and small ways we take action to help and to heal.

We may not be able to change the *gezerah* - the decree, the future that awaits us. But these spiritual tools help us change the *roa*, the severity and impact of what is to come.

The future is dark, but we have social, spiritual and moral tools that we can use to shape our lives and this world.

The future is dark, but it is filled with possibility.

The future is dark, but we the Jewish people are agents of hope, we will not despair.

I have one fervent wish for this year, it's a simple one; May 5785 be a good year.

When we ask, “Have the Jewish people found justice, safety and peace?”

We can answer, not yet, but we have hope.