



## A HOPE BORN FROM THE DEPTHS OF SORROW

*Hope doesn't die, and despair is a privilege we cannot afford.*

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת מִמַּעְמְקִים קְרָאֲתֶיךָ ה':

*A song of ascent: Out of the depths I call You, O LORD. (Ps 130:1)*

Let's start at the end: This is a sermon about hope. But you need to know that it's not going to feel that way at first... because I'm not talking about cheap hope, false hope. I have no use for hope as a drug, a distraction, a diversion. Hope as an escape from the pain, and an escape from responsibility.

I'm talking about real hope, life sustaining hope, the kind we so desperately need in our time.

This kind of hope is not easily acquired. It is often born of grief. And it can be the most powerful and potent force in the world. But to get there, we must first be honest about all that we've lost.

In the typical trajectory of loss and grief, a path I have traversed this past year as I have navigated my father's death as an aveilah, a mourner, the bereaved follow a carefully constructed, spiritually and psychologically attuned path that guides us through the stages of grief.

In the earliest days, we are gently wrapped in the loving embrace of friends and family, our rituals drawing quiet attention to the contours of the mourner's heart-- the need to speak and to be silent, to laugh and to cry, to remember. Through the daily recitation of Kaddish, the mourner situates in community, learns to publicly declare her brokenheartedness, and is gently received with an amen, amen, amen, amen, amen... an offering of relentless love from the community, a reminder that we are still tethered to this world, even when everything has fallen apart. The whole grieving process—from burial through the first yahrzeit—is thoughtfully calibrated to usher the mourner through all of the firsts: first week without your beloved, then the first month, first rainstorm without him, first birthday, first anniversary. First Passover Seder.

All of it, designed to help us contextualize death as a feature of life, and grief as an expression of love. I found this journey deeply comforting.

But this year, the dissonance between my own personal grief and our collective grief since October 7th, could not have been more striking.

Here's the question I was asked perhaps more than any other as I traveled around the country speaking about my book this past year: if the very heart of life is seeing and holding and blessing the brokenhearted, what if everyone—literally everyone—in your minyan is a mourner? Who then says amen to your kaddish?

What a poignant and painful question to ask. What a horror that we're living in a time in which we must.

The nature of our collective loss this year—the ceaseless layering of grief on top of grief—the messy, tortured, incessant heartache, the fact of a whole people caught in the cruel grips of the unknown... all of this has made a mockery of the careful order our tradition offers when the world is upside down.

Two weeks after October 7th, I was in Israel as my niece became bat mitzvah. When I returned, I shared my experience of walking the grounds of Kibbutz Shefayim, where survivors from Kfar Azza were temporarily living.

Our guides walked my brother and me through small clusters of people sitting in circles on the grassy field. "This is shiva," said one of my guides, pointing to gatherings of mourners. "Shivot," the other corrected him. Shivot. When there are multiple shivas—in this small community, more than fifty, all at once. Unimaginable loss.

But this was not all that was lost.

Among the losses that we must grieve are not only the people, but also the deeply held stories and illusions that were shattered this year.

Many, even those whose relationship with Israel had become increasingly attenuated, held on to the core story that the State of Israel meant at least the end of the kind of vulnerability our people met repeatedly throughout history. Remember that part of the *raison d'être* of the State, after all, was that the Jew would no longer be defenseless, that Chmielnicki and Kishinev, Odessa and Baghdad, that Kristallnacht was of the past. Our struggle now was to navigate sovereignty and morality, not plead for and pray for our hostages, torn from their families and suspended for a year between life and death. The Jewish condition—that diasporic fragility and vulnerability—was something we believed had become the stuff of history with the establishment of the State.

Similarly, this year broke, for many, the façade of safety that we clung to here in the States. Our sense, spoken and unspoken, that we'd be protected by the liberal order... broken. I have been fairly clear-eyed these past several years about the emergence of a new-old antisemitism in America. I certainly never thought that I'd worry for my child's safety and wellness, as a Jew in university. I never imagined that she and her friends would be confronted by students shouting "We are all Hamas!" "Zionists don't deserve to live!" and "Go back to Poland!" on her way to class, or that her professors would celebrate rape, murder, and abduction of innocents as "astonishing" and "a stunning achievement." I don't need you to tell me that not every Jewish student on every campus shared this experience. I need you to hear that my kid did. The trolling, the canceling, the condoning of violent rhetoric-- all of this has led to a new understanding of our position in American society as far more provisional than many of us had imagined.

For some, the very idea of Israel broke this past year. For decades, we have struggled to hold the tension between aspirational Israel—an ever-striving liberal democracy—and real Israel, in which core Jewish and democratic values (equality, justice, the perpetual pursuit of peace) are openly mocked and eviscerated from the highest offices.

Now we hear the call of the hostage families-- laying the blame for their loved ones languishing in captivity not only on Hamas, but on their own government—which abandons its own people with the *hekhsher* (permission) of their in-house rabbis, whose callous disregard for human life is a dark stain on our people.

And we know that war is terrible. But to witness the magnitude of the loss in Gaza: the deaths, the displacement, the hunger, the surgeries performed without anesthesia on hospital floors... I sat in the living room with a Palestinian friend here in LA, whose family is from Khan Yunis. She and her cousin created a spreadsheet listing all their relatives, and when they reached 142 dead, she stopped keeping track. How can we make sense of entire multi-generational clans being wiped out, in one fell swoop? How can we bear it?

And meanwhile, a widespread hardening of the heart from not only Israel's governing zealots, but also so many in our Jewish community-- both there and here. As if even acknowledging their pain would somehow diminish our own.

Likewise, this year in the Jewish state—a state built by refugees and survivors of state sanctioned violence—we saw Jewish extremists attack aid trucks delivering food and medicine to starving Gazans, and threaten and burn Palestinian homes and schools in the West Bank. And they are not only countenanced by—but fueled by—ultranationalist, messianic, hardline extremists who have migrated from the hilltops to the halls of power. It is clear that while too

few people are paying attention, these annexationists are dragging Israel to the brink of an existential crisis. Our Israel is... broken.

And of all these things, there is yet one more loss in the shattered tableau of our time: we have broken. Our grief has taken a toll on our families, our friendships, and our communities. We see in one another cowardice, callousness, and criminal stupidity. Woeful ignorance and willful indifference. We have caused each other so much pain-- when we hear certain narratives centered at the expense of others, we feel hurt and betrayed. We're all so tender--when someone we love uses or fails to use particular words in particular moments, our grief is compounded. I know I have caused some of you pain this year as I've tried to navigate this impossible unknown. I hope you'll forgive me. Please trust that I have tried, always, to speak from Torah values and to lead with love-- never to deepen anyone's heartache or sense of alienation. Meanwhile, we've all become adept at retreat and avoidance, the very things we are warned not to do when our hearts are broken.

The Rabbis tell a story in Sanhedrin of a deep, irrepressible brokenness, the kind too many experienced this year.

A mother is suffering from an unrelenting grief after the death of her child, and she cries and cries, night after night. This woman happens to be a neighbor of Rabban Gamliel, the nasi, the chief of the High Court. When Rabban Gamliel lies down to sleep, he hears her piercing wail through the black of night. The sound of her anguished cry awakens something in Rabban Gamliel, and he too, begins to cry out—the two of them in a symphony of sorrow, their cries meeting in the cool night air.

This goes on for some time—a sacred solidarity that finds its voice only in the depth of night. Until one day, Rabban Gamliel's students notice their teacher has cried so deeply that he has no eyelashes left. They are distressed—this woman's heartache is getting in the way of the work of the community. And so they determine: the bereaved mother must be banished. Alas, she is forced to navigate her lonely pain now in complete isolation, having lost her son, her home, and even her distant nighttime companion in tears.

The story is told with a quiet shrug-- but that does not disguise the profound failure of its message. Sometimes it's just too painful to engage one another's heartache, the students seem to be saying. Sometimes it's just too complicated, or too distracting. Better to block out their pain. Tear down their posters, turn the channel. Get back to work, or war. Stay the course.

But we must grieve together. Walter Breuggemann, the Protestant theologian, argues that our most urgent task—when everything is broken—is to embrace, model, and practice grief. (79) Because only through honest grief, an acknowledgment of all that we've lost, can we begin to collectively articulate hope for the prospect of something completely new, some fresh historical possibility (119).

The connection between grief and hope strikes me as both counterintuitive and absolutely critical. Hope, Breuggemann writes, is a tenacious act of imagination, (125) one that emerges not from naive fantasy, but from deep honesty and deep pain. There is simply no shortcut.

I have thought a lot about the audacity of standing here, this Rosh Hashanah, speaking about hope after this year of devastation and destruction, including the news unfolding over the past 48 hours and even as we speak. Even the word--hope--can feel like a betrayal of reality.

But the more I wrestled, at times this past year, with my own deep despondency, the more I knew we must speak of it.

Last month, after the six captives were murdered, I experienced one of those moments of heavy, grinding, inescapable hopelessness.

I am not pollyannaish... But I somehow not only hoped but fully believed that we would see a miracle, that this story—the love of these families and the fundamental goodness of these young people—would end as a redemption story. That after all that had been lost, Hersh would return home to his beloveds in Jerusalem and we would enter an era of healing.

And so for me, and for many of us, the death of Hersh felt like the death of hope.

I got on the phone with the son of Vivian Silver. Vivian was a fierce fighter for peace, who was murdered by Hamas in her home on October 7th. Since her death, her son, Yonatan, has picked up the baton and carried on his mother's work.

I told him that everyone I know—especially those dedicated to building a just and peaceful future-- is struggling with hope. Where do you find it? I asked him.

I don't wake up feeling hopeful, he said. I wake up and do the work. Hope is in the work.

Here's what I had to remind myself: hope doesn't die when even the worst, and most unthinkable eventualities come to pass. Hope doesn't die, because hope is not a feeling. Feelings are fleeting. Hope is a core value, a fundamental orientation. We describe IKAR as a defiantly hopeful community, because we know that hope is not the way that we feel on a given Tuesday, but the way that we look at the world no matter what happened that Tuesday.

Hope doesn't die, because hope is a verb, a spiritual practice. It has to be practiced. Vaclav Havel, Czech author, dissident, statesman, said this best: "Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out." Hope must be drawn up, over and over again, even against a backdrop of great disappointment.

Hope doesn't die, because hope is a moral imperative. It is a supreme act of faith to recognize that even in the most agonizing and constricting circumstances, we always have choices to make. How will I spend the time I have left? What will I do to honor my loved one's memory? What if I can influence only one person's thinking? In what way can I embody love, even still? These questions themselves are an expression of agency, and of hope.

Almog Sarusi, 27, was one of the hostages executed in September, in a tunnel deep beneath the earth. He had been at the Nova Festival with his girlfriend, Shahar, who was badly injured in the early hours of the attack. It was said that Almog may have been able to escape the onslaught, but he was abducted as he stayed behind to tend to his beloved as she died.

Almog was buried last month in Ra'anana, his hometown. Many thousands of people went to the funeral, many more than could fit in the tent of mourners, where the family eulogized him. My brother was there—a couple of blocks away, standing in the street with his neighbors, hoping only to communicate to Almog's bereft family that they were not alone in their devastation.

They couldn't hear what was being said in the mourning tent. But at some point, the family said: *yitgadal v'yitkadash shmei rabbah*, and the several hundred people closest to them said, at once: AMEN.

When the group just beyond the tent heard this, they too said AMEN.

And then the group behind them.

Until finally the rolling AMEN reached my brother and his family. And they cried from the depths of their being: AMEN. May this bereaved family find solace, knowing that they are not alone. We will not mute their sorrow or look away from their pain. No, this sorrow is a shared sorrow, awakening in us our own humanity. We must honor Almog's memory by helping to build the gentle, loving world that he strove to embody.

Enveloping mourners in this sacred presence-- this is one of the greatest gifts we can give one another. Our shared anguish is not an end, but an opening, an invitation into our own transformation.

So I'm back to Rabban Gamliel's students. Why would the Talmud tell a story that so bluntly ignores what is so eminently clear: we need each other. We cannot grieve, or find hope, outside a circle of care.

Could we not imagine a different end to that story? I am ever grateful to Melilah Hellner-Eshed for sharing this summer a midrash, written by Liora Ayalon, a bereaved mother from Kfar Azza. Liora's son was murdered in his safe room, while hiding from Hamas with his daughter.

Liora offers only a simple tweak to the Talmud's conclusion, which changes its message entirely. The students saw Rabban Gamliel's tears-- and recognized that this bereaved mother broke their teacher's cold indifference, how her grieving heart awakened his deepest humanity. And they determined that--confronted with this mother's honest sorrow--the whole world could wake up!

Liora asks us to imagine the bereaved mother, not banished from home, but instead transformed into an ambassador of grief, hopeful grief. She travels from one neighborhood to the next sharing her story, speaking of her son, saying his name, weeping for him. "Her voice, like a Shofar that sounds from one end of the earth to another," invites strangers to cry by her side. "Their tears," Liora writes, "would cleanse their souls." She--the bereaved--would find "some respite for her [weary] soul." And "the sorrow of the world would diminish just a little." [1]

This is a brilliant, subversive and dare-I-say hopeful ending to the story, written by a mother who refuses for the final note on her own story to be one of blackened despair. We must never hide or flatten or circumscribe our grief. It is our sorrow that can connect the depths of our hearts to one another. In fact, it can awaken the heart of the whole world.

I am very aware that the stories we tell these days shape our perception of reality. So I want to share with you a story from the wreckage of the past year that you may not have heard about, a glimpse of what that hope-born-of-grief might look like as a mass movement:

On July 1, I stepped into an arena in Tel Aviv, where 6,000 people--Israelis and Palestinians--had come together to proclaim their hope for a different future. This was nine months after October 7-- nine months of war and devastation, of anguish and heartache on both sides of the broken fence. Nine months (and 76 years) of being told by the whole world that we--Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians--are eternal enemies.

But packed into this arena were thousands of people defying that inevitability. Making a different choice. They prayed, sang, and called, together, for peace.

Many of the speakers were themselves bereaved. Some of the Israelis had been hostages in Gaza, some still had family in captivity. Some Palestinians had family members who were killed in Gaza or in the West Bank. They spoke of their agony and anguish, their longing and their love. They spoke about how their shared sorrow had birthed in them a new sense of possibility. They asked us to join them in imagining peace.

They subversively transformed the story of their time from a call to total victory—יחד לנצח—to a call to radical healing: יחד לתקן.

It's time, they said. Out of the darkest chapter in our history, out of blood and ash, we must birth a new hope.

Listen, these voices are not exactly normative. Like here, there is much more fear, cynicism, and despair on the airwaves and in the public square in Israel than there is hope. But one after the next, speakers rose to the stage and proclaimed: Bitter conflicts have ended, and this one can end too.

I can't help but be inspired by the people who are most proximate to the pain, each one of them drawing upon a deep, irrepressible hope to fuel the work of making peace.

But please hear me: because hope is a core value, an action, a moral imperative-- it is not enough for us to gaze at others and be by their ability to continue to find hope. We must support and amplify the people doing that work. (Most of their efforts can be supported through the New Israel Fund.) And we must embody it ourselves. It must become part of our own spiritual practice.

So what can we do?

Here I turn to Amos Oz, the literary giant and great warrior for peace, who was famously asked, in an interview: considering all that has been broken, and all the grave challenges of our time, what should we do now? Here's how he answered:

[There's] a fire, and the flames are big and horrific. Every one of us has to choose what to do when confronting a big fire. You can run for your life and leave those who can not run to burn, because unfortunately they cannot run. You can write an angry letter to the editor blaming those who started the fire. But you can also take a bucket of water and pour it on the fire.

And if you don't have a bucket, use a glass or a cup.

And if you don't even have that, use a teaspoon. Every one of us has a teaspoon. Fill it with water and throw it in the fire.



This is the torah of hope for our time. There is something, born not of an escape from the pain of this world, but from its honest engagement, that every one of us must be part of.

I have seen, this year, how this community picked up our teaspoons.

We set out, in these excruciating times, to build the muscle of our own moral imagination: to reject the toxic, maximalist norms of the “anti-this” and “pro-that” public square by insisting on a third way discourse right here at home. We recognized that we had to become the voice of moral reason that we so yearned to hear in this time of immorality and irrationality. Rather than fall prey to competitive victimization, we opened our hearts with compassion and curiosity. We strove to de-escalate, rather than escalate. We sought to add more light than heat. And when we disagreed, we practiced staying in the room.

We sought to hold the complicated and undeniable truth that we are called to love our Jewish family: *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ*, from Leviticus (19:18)-- even when they live far away, and their ideology or religious practice or worldview is contrary to ours, and even when they don't act like they love us back. Like it or not, when your family grieves, you grieve with them. And, at the very same time, we are called to love the stranger-- whoever is suffering the most in our midst: *כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם*; from Deuteronomy (10:19), *וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת־הַגֵּר*—because we were strangers in the land of Egypt, and we know the heart of the stranger. And—as Rabbi Shai Held argues—Torah “refuses to choose one pole and deny the other; it includes and even celebrates both.”

Because it is nonsensical, in the eyes of the Torah, to love our family but abandon the stranger. And it is heresy, in the eyes of the Torah, to love the stranger at the expense of your own family!

This year we felt a new sense of urgency around engaging our Jewish identity. We experienced an awakening of spiritual impulses that for many had been dormant, a private sensibility that desperately needed to be made public. Many of us manifested that mysterious yearning in *kippot* and *magen David* necklaces, yellow ribbons and torn masking tape and hostage tags.

...But these were, for us, more than symbols of tribal affiliation. I am a Jew-- we said-- in shul and in our schools and at the airport and in the market, I am a Jew guided by the deepest spiritual truth: we believe that every person is created in God's own image, and therefore every human life is precious. To take that seriously is to believe that the death of any innocent is a moral catastrophe. And to know that our life's work is to create a world in which our people, and all people can thrive.

This year, we worked to make space for each other's sorrow. We broke open our hearts to the Gazan mothers who had to write their babies' names on their bodies so they could be

identified-- God forbid!--if they were hit in an aerial bombardment. And we opened our hearts to Abigail and Hersh and Almog and Eden, and all the other captives, their names and faces, our constant companions. We wept together for the bereaved families huddled in tents in Khan Yunis, and the Druze Israeli children of Mejdal Shams, killed by Hezbollah as they played football, and for Banah Amjad Bakr Laboum, a 13-year-old Palestinian girl shot by the IDF in her home in Nablus.

We learned, together, that our hearts are capacious enough to hold both. We fundraised for the people of Kfar Azza, and we helped NIF launch a campaign for emergency food and medicine for the children of Gaza that raised nearly \$750k in the first week alone. And while that may seem fundamentally contradictory to many, it seemed to us the only human thing to do.

It has not been easy holding these competing commitments. I am certain I'm not the only one who woke up, some days, and just yearned to wrap up in a flag and stop feeling everything all the time.

But we reminded ourselves that God gave us hearts capacious enough to hold the fellow and the stranger. We prayed for the release of the captives, and for the safety of the *hayalim*- young people fighting to defend Israel, and their war-weary families. We sang *Aheinu*, the Jewish anthem of our time, and we prayed for an end to war, and for a just future for Palestinians and Israelis alike, and for the protection of all human life. We took seriously the theological and spiritual mandate to hold it all.

We worried that we were an island. But then we realized if we were all here together, it wouldn't be so lonely on that island. And the sunsets would be amazing. So we took our loneliness and broken heartedness, and we engaged in a new discourse. A discourse that our Jewish community, and the world, needs.

This, friends, this gives me hope.

At times, this year, our voice seemed like a whisper in a thunderstorm. One teaspoon of water is powerless in the face of a raging fire. But we must remember, and keep reminding one another: we are not just one teaspoon. As Oz said:

The teaspoon is very small and the fire is very large. But there are many of us, and every one of us has a teaspoon.

[So what can we do? This is...] my simple answer to this question. I do what I can as a teacher, as a writer, as a neighbor, as a citizen to pour some water on the flames of hatred and incitement and fanaticism and bigotry and prejudice. I have words and I use words. My words are my teaspoon.

Listen: the days ahead will require every bit of our strength-- spiritual, political and material. This past year has proven that there are no sidelines for us diaspora Jews to stand on as history unfolds across the ocean. Like it or not, we are all bound up in this story. So, friends, let us take up our buckets, or cups, or even our teaspoons, and do our part to put out this fire. Some will write, and some will preach. Some will donate. Some will speak up at the dinner table, or at the board meeting. Some will gently reach out to friends who fear they no longer have a home in the Jewish community, and show them anyone whose heart is big enough to hold all this heartache and humanity is welcome-- at our Hillels, in our shuls, at our shabbat lunches. We all have a role to play.

In the brokenness of our time, a new hope is being born. It is rooted in the clear, unabashed insistence that a better future is possible. Only together will we be able to transform this most painful moment into the beginning of the next chapter—the beginning of a path toward a just and peaceful future.

I close with one final story of hope: on Tuesday, the ballistic missile attack imminent, in the midst of the mad scramble to make sure all family and friends were safe, I received a text from a friend, a leading Palestinian Sheikh and peacebuilder in Jerusalem:

אני חי ומרגיש את כל הכאב בארץ הקודש

*I am feeling the pain of the people of this holy land deeply, he wrote.*

בכל זאת אני לא מאבד תקווה שנגיע למקום יותר טוב

*Even still, I have not lost hope that we will emerge from this in a better place.*

ממשכים להתפלל ולעבוד יום ולילה כדי להגיע למקום יותר טוב

*We must continue to pray, and to work-- day and night-- to get to that better place.*

*Amen v'amen v'amen.*

I wish you all *shana tovah*--