

Rosh Hashanah Morning
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander
October 3, 2016

I recently saw a statistic and it made me do a double-take. Apparently 13% of potential voters in the upcoming presidential election would prefer to have a giant meteor crash into the Earth and destroy civilization than see either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton become president.¹ Think about that: More than one in ten (that would be at least one person sitting in every row here this morning) is in that kind of despair over the state of our government. And to hear others talk, seeing the candidate they are not supporting elected president would be *the equivalent* of a giant meteor.

But it's not just politics. Despair is defined as "loss of hope; hopelessness," and the narrative surrounds us. It's like the board game Clue: There's this pervasive sense that we're *going* to meet a terrible end; the questions are only where, by whom, and how. Will the impact of medical crises cost us our jobs, our homes, our loved ones? Will crushing student debt consume the dreams of the next generation? Will a planet whose climate is ever intensifying, even *be around* in a generation or two? Will we fall victim to the evil schemes of our enemies – enemies who, depending to whom you listen, could be anyone who looks, talks or thinks differently than we do? Is there *any* path to peace for Israelis and Palestinians? For Syrians? For Yemen? Are we doomed to bear witness to spiraling violence in our *own* cities – city after city – Columbus, Tulsa, Charlotte? Or worse – are we becoming immune to it? "A quarter to half of children surveyed [from the UK, Australia, and the United States] are so troubled about the state of the world, they honestly believe it will come to an end before they get older."²

Today we turn the page on the Jewish calendar to a new year, a clean slate, fresh hope. But how on earth does one find hope in such a sea of anxiety?

Well, nothing paints a more despairing picture than the words of *Un'taneh Tokef* we read earlier this morning, words which legend tells us entered the liturgy during the horror and persecution of the Crusades. "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die?" And of those who shall die, by what terrible means does the end await?

Why do we continue to read this prayer? Here we are with a brand new prayer book, one that seeks to minimize the dissonance we often feel with the prayers of our ancestors and acknowledge the wide range of needs and theologies with which we enter this sacred space. Editors pored over the language and possibilities of the book we hold in our hands. Certainly the

¹ *The Week*, July 2016.

² "The Rise of Ocean Optimism," Elin Kelsey, *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 8, 2016.

narrative of despair and destruction we see on the news or read in the paper is sufficiently vivid. We're not lacking for worst-case scenarios. So why did this prayer make the cut?

But that's just it! The gloom and doom of *Un'taneh Tokef* is imminently relevant and relatable; it reflects our deepest anxieties and despair... and we have to *keep reading*... because at the end of the prayer, there's hope.

וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתַפְלָה וְצְדָקָה מְעַבְרִין אֶת רֵעַ הַגְּזֵרָה.

"Repentance, prayer and charity can temper the harshness of the decree."

There are three imminently doable practices with a long history of leading our people to hope, the hope we so desperately need and desire today.

The first practice is *t'shuvah* – repentance, as we usually translate it. But the root of the word literally means "return." Our tradition tells us that, through the work of these holy days, we can return to the purity of innocence, to the vivid imaginings of youth.

Remember when all you needed for entertainment was a stick and a patch of dirt? When a laundry basket could be an airplane, a shoebox a robot, a sandbox could become the moon? Albert Einstein said: "Imagination is more important than intelligence" – and this is true for all of us, not only kids. Imagination ignites our passion, stimulates creativity and innovation, and is a significant factor – some would say *the key factor* – in the advancement and improvement of our world.³

Dr. Eddie Glaude, Jr., religion professor and Chair of the Center for African-American Studies at Princeton University, said earlier this year here in Charleston that "imagination is the battleground" of our times.

We are experiencing a crisis of imagination, he said, ... something more than a failure to be creative. Imagination involves an ability to see the as yet... imagine one's condition beyond the absurdity of now. ... Imagination involves empathic projection... seeing oneself in relations to others, [trying] to understand those who are not like us.

Today we find ourselves in dark times, unable to imagine otherwise. ... [But] democracies require human beings who are able to imagine themselves *beyond* the difficulties of now, who *are* able to see themselves in relationship with others.

Consider Natalie Hampton, a 16 year old who imagined herself in the shoes of teens who feel ostracized and isolated in the social minefield that is a school cafeteria. She created an app that lets a student discretely find a table where compassionate classmates are happy to have someone

³ "Five Reasons Imagination Is More Important Than Reality," Lamisha Serf-Walls, *Huffington Post*, January 4, 2015.

new join them. Doesn't that vision give you hope? In fact, over the course of one school year, some fifty middle schools successfully utilized social media tools to reduce bullying and student conflict reports by 30%.⁴ We have more creativity, more technology, more resources to harness than ever before. Israeli doctors are performing operations to remove the tremors associated with Parkinson's. 3-D printers are manufacturing artificial organs for transplant. Creative conservation efforts have brought animals *off* of the endanger species list. And senior centers are harassing FaceTime technology to connect elderly residents with international students who want to practice their English.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "God speaks to us through our imaginations." The question is, do we have the courage to listen? That's where the second practice, *T'filah* – prayer, comes in.

Last year there was a report that the city of Jackson, MS, faced \$743 million worth of necessary repairs to its crumbling infrastructure – a daunting amount, to be sure. The mayor's solution? Prayer. "Yes," he said, "I believe we can pray potholes away. Moses prayed and a sea opened."⁵

Now, that's not the kind of prayer I'm suggesting, nor do I think it's the approach of our liturgy. As Rabbi Chaim Stern has written: "Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will."

My colleague at Circular Congregational Church, Rev. Jeremy Rutledge, has reflected on how often people turn to religion, and religious leaders, for consolation, certainty, assurance; to avoid tension or unpleasantness. Yet that's really not what religion is about. It's about making life more honest. It's about taking risks and working for change in ourselves and the world. We are hardly certain what the outcomes will be. But the only thing we can ever be certain of is our will, our conviction. Religion is about finding the courage to dream in the face of uncertainty, to live boldly and free.⁶

And so we pray for a...

Pure heart
Clear mind
Generous vision
Gentle words
The courage to say yes
The strength to say no

⁴ "Teen Makes 'Sit With Us' App That Helps Students Find Lunch Buddies," Elyse Wanshel, *Huffington Post*, September 12, 2016.

⁵ *The Week*, August 2015.

⁶ "The Risk of Being Religious," Rev. Jeremy Rutledge, May 22, 2016.

Steadiness in [God's] work
Purpose every day
Strength to do what is called for, even when it is hard
Strength to do what is right, especially when others do not⁷

We pray for courage to pursue the visions of our imagination, resilience when challenges threaten to push us back, clarity when the vision begins to fade. Prayer may not directly alter the circumstances of the world around us; but prayer can change *us*, and we can change the world.

And the third practice ensures that we always remain engaged in that world – that no matter how far hope recedes, we won't recede, as well. This year, in particular, our souls need stories of *tzedakah* – radical generosity.

Estella Pyffom, a retired teacher from Florida, spent nearly a million dollars of her retirement money to turn a bus into a mobile classroom for underprivileged students. She decked it out with computers and desks, and drives it through a predominantly low-income county, offering local kids a safe place to do homework and learn about technology.⁸

Five construction management students at Colorado State University designed a wheelchair swing, an elevated sandbox, and built a customized playground that allowed Libby and James, 11-year-old twins with cerebral palsy, to be able to play outside in their own backyard.⁹

Mark Bustos, a hairstylist at an upscale Manhattan salon, has been spending every Sunday for the past two years walking the streets of New York City, giving free haircuts to homeless people on the sidewalks. One recipient was particularly memorable. "He didn't have much to say," Bustos recalled, "but after I showed him what he looked like, the first thing he did say was, 'Do you know anyone that's hiring?'"¹⁰

We feel in our souls what research has proven: "Apocalyptic storytelling" causes collateral damage.

Hopelessness undermines the very engagement with ... issues we seek to create. There are limits to the amount of concerns we can deal with at a time ... [a] 'finite pool of worry.' Overburdening people's capacity for worry with too much doom and gloom leads to emotional numbing. When we believe our actions are too small to make a difference,

⁷ *Mishkan HaNefesh: Yom Kippur*, p. 71, 365.

⁸ *The Week*, February 2013.

⁹ *The Week*, May 2013.

¹⁰ *The Week*, August 2014.

we tend to behave in ways that create the conditions in which those expectations are realized. ... Hopelessness is a self-fulfilling prophecy."¹¹

But this, too, we know – "things are far more resilient than [we] ever imagined" and "emotions, it turns out, are contagious." Hope begets hope, joy sparks joy, and confidence inspires confidence.

This was the spirit that prompted marine conservationists to launch the hashtag #OceanOptimism, reaching more than 59 million people in the past two years with encouraging stories of real-life conservation success. "Life is complicated," says its founder. "Things get horribly wrecked. That is true. But the remarkable capacity for renewal is true, too. ... Far from making us complacent, stories of resilience and recovery fuel hope. Feeling hopeful enhances our capacity to take meaningful action. And that action flourishes in the supportive community of others."

So let's commit ourselves to seeking out better prophecies and more hopeful visions. Let's listen to Margaret Mead, and "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has." And Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Remember[ing] that there is meaning beyond absurdity. ... Be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can, everyone, do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all the frustrations and all disappointments." And let's heed that great modern prophet we lost just this year, Elie Wiesel, who wrote:

I belong to a generation that has often felt abandoned by God and betrayed by mankind. And yet, I believe that we must not give up on either. ...

I know – I speak from experience – that even in darkness it is possible to create light and encourage compassion. That it is possible to feel free inside a prison. That even in exile, friendship exists and can become an anchor. That one instant before dying, man is still immortal.

There it is: I still believe in man in spite of man. ... Such is the miracle: A tale about despair becomes a tale against despair.¹²

Let this be our tale in 5777 – and let's spread it far and wide. May our imaginations ignite empathy and creativity. May our prayers strengthen our will and resolve. And may acts of generosity and justice fill our spirits with warmth and inspiration. May the New Year be a year of hope, a year of courage, and a year of determination for each of us. And let us say: Amen.

¹¹ Kelsey.

¹² *Open Heart*, Elie Wiesel (2012), p. 72