



“GESTURES OF HOPE”

Dramatic gestures in public life are nothing new, even as the tones or formats may change. North Korea launches missiles. Both their leader and our president volley threats. Athletes and others make statements around the national anthem and the flag. We wonder about each and intention. Dramatic gestures indeed date back millennia, but their tones and formats may change.

For example, in 587 BCE, the prophet Jeremiah proved he was master of such public acts. It was a tense time for our ancestors. The Babylonians were bearing down on Jerusalem. The destruction that would follow was already clear to all. After constantly imploring the people about the consequences of their sinful behavior, Jeremiah shifts into a more comforting tone. His very manner indicates that the prophet knows that disaster was about to befall Judah, the southern kingdom of the ancient Israelites. In Jeremiah 32, the prophet follows a seemingly crazy prophetic path. Jeremiah understands God to say:

“Your...[cousin]... will come to you, saying: ‘Buy my land in Anatot, because you have the redemption-right to buy it.’” (Jeremiah 32:7)

Sure enough, Jeremiah’s cousin shows up with such a request to buy his share of the land in the family’s home region, North East of Jerusalem. The prophet purchases his cousin’s land.

This purchase is seemingly crazy because it occurs just before the Temple will be destroyed and the Babylonian Exile will begin. Yet, Jeremiah completes the exchange, declaring:

“For thus says the God of heaven’s hosts, the God of Israel: Houses, fields, and vineyards shall again be bought in the land.” (32:15)

It is quite a dramatic gesture, even looking back 2500 years later. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, the late Columbia University historian, explained Jeremiah 32, saying:

“To buy a field on the very eve of destruction and exile is a quintessential act of hope that is hardly an inevitable response to hopelessness.”
 (“Toward a History of Jewish Hope”, [The Faith of Fallen Jews](#), 2014 (though article is originally 1985), p.302)

This hopeful response to disaster so inspired the rabbis that they assigned Jeremiah 32 as the Haftarah to Parashat B’har, near the end of Leviticus. In tomorrow morning’s Haftarah, Isaiah encourages us towards proper moral action. Jeremiah was always calling out for such behavior, but at that awful moment, the prophet offered hope. His hope was for the People of Israel, but we can draw broader conclusions. Jeremiah was asserting then and for all time that we humans might be noticed by God. We flawed creatures might just be worthy of a transformed future.

Our ancestors dared suggest that we could improve our behavior and thus alter our fate. Chutzpah you might call it, but that very chutzpah is the basis for our prayers and our Judaism. On Yom

Kippur, we are given the opportunity to consider and confess. We pray that our repentance will be met with acceptance. As the prayer Sh’ma Koleinu expresses:

“With hope, Adonai, we await You:
surely, you, Adonai our God—You will answer.”
([Mishkan Hanefesh Yom Kippur](#) p.98)

Our prayers anticipate that we can change. Our tradition encourages that such change can have a meaningful outcome our individual lives. That is the basis of our confessional prayers on this Day of Repentance.

Jeremiah’s focus was on the entire people’s behavior, not each individual’s reality. Sh’ma Koleinu, like so many of our prayers today, is also in the plural. Before we rush to our individual fates, we are called to consider a shared aspect of the promise this day offers. We have held out hope against hope that someday Anti-Semitism might fade away. If our ancestors could hold a vision of faith against the Babylonian Exile, so might we see a resolution of this long-standing and illogical hatred of the Jewish people. Some thought we had reached that day, or at least were getting closer.

However, let us consider our world and the words the writer Paul Berman shared in the Forward:

“Fears that only yesterday seemed absurd or silly begin to seem reasonable and more than reasonable. Thoughts that might have seemed inconceivable even two months ago become not just conceivable but spoken out loud. Crowds chant utter wildness on the street. In this way, the clouds grow blacker before our eyes. Very small clouds, you may say. Still, the transformation takes place at stupendous speed. Not everyone notices. The failure to notice constitutes a small black cloud in itself.”
([Those Who Forget the Past](#), Edited by Ron Rosenbaum, 2004, p.14, original article, May 24, 2002)

Ring familiar? Paul Berman wrote these ominous words in 2002 in an article entitled ‘Something’s Changed: Bigotry in Print. Crowds Chant Murder.’ The Anti-Semitic chants of 2017 echo those of 15 years earlier and the generation before and so on. Over the years, it has made sense to turn our attention to other groups in need of a dose of hope and attention. However, when the ‘crowds chant utter wildness’, than we are reminded that Anti-Semitism is real and present. After Charlottesville, I was moved by the many younger people who wanted to discuss their new-found awareness about Anti-Semitism. They had suddenly learned that we needed to protect our own, while also worrying about broader justice. Experience has taught our people that we need to worry about our own fate, in addition to those of others.

Thinking about our own hope comes slowly for some. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi would not have been surprised by the speed of this recognition. As he wrote:

"Hope that comes too easily is a hope that cannot impress... We cannot explore the history of Jewish hope without at the same time exploring the history of Jewish despair. Only when we become painfully aware of the historical depths of Jewish despair, only when we take it seriously, will we begin to realize that Jewish hope is not an historical 'given' to be taken for granted..." (p.303)

Our history teaches us to take nothing for granted. We can't assume that justice will take care of itself for Jews or for others. We have learned that each generation must work for that justice anew. However, linking all the way back to Jeremiah and to our traditional prayers, we are told that hope is worthwhile.

Our current prayerbook weaves modern insights into our worship as well. Way back on our Mishkan Hanefesh's page 3, we are encouraged by the words of the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

"And why is the tallit striped and not checkered black-and-white like a chessboard? Because squares are finite and hopeless. Stripes come from infinity and to infinity they go..." ('Gods Change, Prayers are Here to Stay', Mishkan Hanefesh Yom Kippur, p.3)

These words, from Amichai's last published book, are found in fuller form in our regular Saturday morning prayerbook. In both Yom Kippur and Shabbat settings, this prayer encourages us to be hopeful with the possibilities of the year and the week.

Jeremiah utilized an image of his day, the exchange of land. Amichai playfully presents further images we can embrace. The poet goes on to imagine those stripes as airport runways. Our very garments are transformed into gateways of possibility. Yehuda Amichai narrows our focus. These lines of verse are set within a vision of an adult remembering climbing out of the pool or the sea as a young person. The tallit and the towel are linked in an intimate vision of potential.

We are thus reminded that the plural of our Yom Kippur prayers is not only about communal solidarity and shared fate. The plural conjugation is intended to support individuals through our repentance. It is easier to ponder our misdirected actions if we are reviewing the year together. It is safer to judge ourselves, if we are studying a broad list of sins, so many of which are not personally relevant. If there is hope for an ancient misbehaving people, than certainly there might just be hope for each of us. The rabbis of old understood the personal level as well. They taught in the rabbinic commentary on Psalms:

"Let not man say, 'I have sinned and there is no hope for me,' but let him put his confidence in the Holy One, who is blessed, and he will be received." (Midrash Tehillim 40.3)

The ancient text is prodding us. Don't scan these long lists of sins and shrink into despair. Rather, consider your life bravely and honestly, and feel a sense of renewal in the process. Embrace the possibilities of repentance and Yom Kippur can turn into positive, if serious, day.

I would suggest that you not get lost in the litanies of endless misdeeds. Rather, at each confessional prayer, feel the presence of your fellow congregants. Let our shared voices guide you to consider your past year. Don't drown in the verbiage, but rather focus on certain verbs that capture personal weakness and low

points. Together, may we each ascend from our own valley.

The 18th Century Nachman of Bratslav supposedly taught:

"If you have believe you have the power to run, believe you have the power to repair."
(Repentance: The Meaning and Practice of Teshuvah, Louis Newman, 2010, page 152)

Nachman was providing hope for the individual. If we have the chutzpah to transgress, than we can find the chutzpah to improve our actions. This teaching links with tomorrow afternoon's Haftarah. Jonah's very sin was running from a command to help save others.

May we learn from him that we can use our energies for the positive, and needn't always fear that we lack the strength.

Louis Newman expands upon this message in his book Repentance: The Meaning and Practice of Teshuvah.

"The ability to transgress and the ability to repent arise from the same source: we cannot have the one without the other.... Hope is the spiritual foundation of teshuvah. But this doesn't mean that our faith in the possibility of renewal must be rock solid before we can begin rebuilding our lives. Sometimes just a ray of hope is enough to convince us that teshuvah is possible and that, in turn, enables us to take small steps along the path of repentance.... The important thing is just that we have enough hope to believe that starting down that path is both possible and worthwhile."
(Ibid., page 152)

Jeremiah had hope that the whole people could rebuild their lives. He offered them an inspiring vision. Despite the centuries of Anti-Semitism, we have learned to vigilant, while building coalitions of caring with others. Finally, may this Yom Kippur provide a ray of hope that we can do better in the New Year. May we make our own gestures towards hope. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be God's will.