

In the 1930s, a dark joke was told about a rabbi in Germany who was reading the Nazi paper called *Der Stürmer*. A congregant came up to him, astonished, and said, "Rabbi, how can you be reading that Nazi rag, filled with libels of the worst kind. Are you some kind of masochist, or, God forbid, a self-hating Jew?"

"On the contrary," the rabbi responded, "When I used to read the Jewish papers, all I learned about were pogroms, riots in Palestine, and assimilation in America. But now that I read *Der Stürmer*, I see that the Jews control all the banks, we pull all the strings in the art world and cinema, and that we're on the verge of taking over the entire world. You know – it makes me feel a whole lot better!"

In her work counselling those who lived through the *Shoah* (Holocaust), psychotherapist Shoshana Comet challenged the common way to refer to those who lived through the *Shoah* as "survivors." That term, she argued, made people victims who were defined by their guilt, anxiety and depression. Rather, she argued that we need to recognize the dignity and agency of those who had found the inner strength to survive their experiences and build new lives for themselves after such a horrible experience. We need a new kind of language, she felt, to express the power of people to live through such a trauma and live full lives. Thus, she suggested, that those who lived through the Nazi horror not be called "survivors", but "victors."

While humor could not stand before the whirlwind of hate that would overtake German, European and much of North African Jewry, Shoshana Comet points us to the wider truth of the joke I opened with. We are the choosers of life, guardians of a dream, advocates of hope.

Yom Kippur is brutally honest about the negative aspects of individual and societal behavior. We admit our collective wrongdoing over and over again. It acknowledges the hate, violence and chaos in the world, and the many ways we undermine our neighbors and betray even those closest to us. You may think that all this self-effacement leads to dominant motif of melancholy and despair. It is, in fact, the very opposite, for alongside the admission of wrongdoing is the positive belief

that things can be better, that we can learn from our mistakes, grow from our sufferings, forgive and be forgiven.

In short, Yom Kippur is a day for “hopeful realism”, providing a reassuring message that we aren't just “survivors” of life's pain. It teaches that we are “victors,” who can give our days meaning and purpose. To be hopeful and also realistic involves a balancing act, what spiritual thinkers describe as equanimity. It is that fine-tuned way that allows us to neither expect too much nor expect too little, putting our own needs and this particular moment in time into a larger perspective.

One day a minister, rabbi and Buddhist monk were at a restaurant debating the best physical position for prayer.

The monk claimed that it is the lotus position, arms outstretched and hands open. “No,” the minister claimed, “it is on our knees, hands clasped together with our eyes closed.” The rabbi said, “I think the best way to pray is wrapped in a *tallit*, the prayer shawl like a hug from God.”

As they were arguing a telephone repairman at the next table turned to them all and said, “Excuse me, but I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. I just want to tell you – with all due respect - the best prayin' I ever did was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole.”

We are living in a period of profound ambivalence about the state of the West. People seem adrift, searching for something better, but not sure what. Identity politics, hyper-partisanship, a culture of victimhood, claims of conspiracy by those on the right and on the left, as well as nativism and populism are manifestations of the unease of our time.

If we want to get a sense of how people feel about this moment, this month's *Atlantic* magazine is all about “Is Democracy Dying?” It is a theme mirrored in many recently published books: *How Democracy Ends*; *The Death of Democracy*; *Can Democracy Survive Global Capitalism?*; *Why Liberalism Failed*; *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*; and *The Suicide of the West: The Rebirth of Tribalism*. David Horowitz, the editor of the online journal *The Times of Israel*, recently made a similar indictment against the state of affairs in Israel, as well. “Israeli democracy,” he wrote, “isn't

broken ... (but it is) being battered. There are attempts to intimidate the judiciary. The media is both demonized and compromised. Financial corruption goes untreated and seeps into politics."¹

A gnawing uncertainty about our bet with the Enlightenment's ideal is in the air. Is the future bleak? Is this truly the worst of times? Well, have you heard the joke about the difference between the Jewish pessimist and the Jewish optimist? The pessimist is angry about the condemnation of Israel in the UN and the success of the BDS movement, worries about the rise of assimilation and lack of affiliation in synagogues, is upset about the alienation of a growing number of young Jews from Israel and says, "things can't get any worse." The Jewish optimist says, "Sure they can."

But there is another way.

During *Kol Nidrei* last night we recited the words Moses said to God: **סלח נא לעון העם** **הזה** *slach na la'avon ha'am hazeh* "Please forgive the sin of this people." And what was the paradigmatic wrong for which he asks that they be forgiven (and thus, us as well)? Not for worshipping the Golden Calf, but for being swayed by the spies who convinced them that they could not enter the land. Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman says that his father, Rabbi Wolfe Kelman taught that the sin of the spies was not that they spoke ill of the land of Israel (for their assessment was true, if exaggerated). So what was it? It was that the people put their faith in unworthy leaders, those who incited fear. This is the great sin on which Yom Kippur is based – to allow give in to hopelessness and despair, to lose faith in ourselves and tomorrow.²

This teaching offers a perspective at the heart of Yom Kippur, which I call "hopeful realism." To be a "hopeful realist" is to honestly acknowledge the challenges yet remain hopeful that better days lie ahead.

Some 1800 years ago four rabbis were walking along Mt. Scopus overlooking Jerusalem and saw a fox run out of a heap of stones where the Temple once stood. Three began to weep for seeing such devastation in a place where once prayers, songs and offerings were made. They mourned the loss of such much and the

¹ Op-Ed "We Are Being Battered ... From Within", *Times of Israel*, August 15, 2018

² Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, "The call for collective accountability and the sin of losing hope", *Times of Israel*, September 17, 2018

seeming hopelessness of the Jews of their time. One of them, Rabbi Akiva, however, began to laugh. Yes, he said, we see the fulfillment of the Biblical prophecy that Jerusalem will be reduced to rubble, but now that we know that prophecy was fulfilled, I have hope that Zechariah's vision that the elderly will once again sit in the streets of Jerusalem will be fulfilled.³

Akiva urges us to see the world beyond our own point-of-view, to have a broader, more long-term vision than just from our own particular moment in history. He rejects the *oy gevalt*-theory of Jewish history – that we are living through a terrible time and need to wring our hands about the future. He suggests, instead, a perspective of hope.

At the end of the Second World War one-third of the Jewish people alive six years earlier had been turned to smoke and ashes. Some two million still alive were stuck behind the Iron Curtain, about to face decades of repression. Just three years later, when Israel was declared a State, it looked as if the third Jewish commonwealth would be stillborn, snuffed out by the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq and when it was not, hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced out of their ancient, ancestral homes throughout the Middle East.

Yet now, 80 years on, there is not a single large oppressed Jewish community in the world. Israel has grown into the largest Jewish community in the world. The vast majority of Jews in the Diaspora live in liberal democracies (in the US, France, Canada and the United Kingdom, with growing communities in Germany and Australia). By living where we do, we have voted with our lives and those of our children that the democratic and egalitarian values of the West best ensure us the blessings of freedom, opportunity and equality. That's why it's best to be Jewish optimist, because things could definitely be worse.

Once, there were three prisoners who were about to be executed. They were told that whatever they wished to have for their last meal it would be granted. The Italian responds, "spaghetti", which he is served and then quickly dispatched. The American

³ Babylonian Talmud, *Makkot* 24b

requests a half-pound hamburger, which he is served and then he is promptly executed. Seeing this, the Jew requests a plate of strawberries.

"Strawberries?!"

"Yes, that's right. Strawberries."

"But they are out of season! It's Winter."

"OK," the Jew says, "I'll wait."

This joke is such a quintessentially Jewish joke because it captures what "hopeful realism" is all about - on the one hand, recognizing the inherent difficulties life offers; on the other hand, finding some way to rise above the difficulties placed before us.

I'm not some Pollyanna, naïvely trying to claim everything is going to be OK. There are circumstances beyond our control, but we can choose how we deal with them. As the prisoner above suggests, we can make the best of our challenges – and keep waiting, and working, for a better day ahead. The Torah we read this morning makes clear the power in our hands. "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. **וּבַחֲרַת חַיִּים** Choose life—if you and your offspring would live - by loving the Eternal your God, heeding God's commands, and holding fast to God." We are more powerful than we dare to think, Yom Kippur says. We have the capacity to do as Akiva did – to take a larger perspective – to have the *chutzpah*, even when things are difficult, to make the best of a difficult situation and "choose life."

Let me offer two rituals that can help be a focus for "hopeful realism". First, when you wake up in the morning say **מוֹדֵה אֲנִי** *modeh ani* – "I offer thanks ... for the breath (the soul) returned to me." Take a deep breath, say "I'm here", grateful for the day you are given. And second, for when you go to bed here's advice I got from a business school professor and observant Christian, who said he asks himself two questions at the end of the day: "What did I do today that I could have done better? And what did I do today that I am proud of?" Focus on those at bedtime, he suggested, and you will know what you regret and want to avoid and what you feel good about building on to create something worthy in the day to come. Just that – one minute in the morning. One minute at bedtime. These centering techniques give

me, and can give you, perspective, gratitude and resolve. They are the foundation of hopeful realism.

Can we really make any difference in the world? Consider this recollection from Stephen Carter, a professor of law at Yale University, who describes how seemingly small act of kindness changed the trajectory of his life:

In the summer of 1966, my parents moved (to) ... Northwest Washington, D.C., and, in those days, a lily-white enclave ... My two brothers and two sisters and I sat on the front steps, missing our playmates, as the movers carried in our furniture. Cars passed what was now our house, slowing for a look, as did people on foot. We waited for somebody to say hello, to welcome us. Nobody did.

I watched the strange new people passing us and wordlessly watching back, and I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here. I knew...

And all at once, a white woman arriving home from work at the house across the street from ours turned and smiled with obvious delight and waved and called out, 'Welcome!' in a booming, confident voice I would come to love. She bustled into her house, only to emerge, minutes later, with a huge tray of cream cheese and jelly sandwiches, which she carried to our porch and offered around with her ready smile, simultaneously feeding and greeting the children of a family she had never met — and a black family at that — with nothing to gain for herself except perhaps the knowledge that she had done the right thing. We were strangers, black strangers, and she went out of her way to make us feel welcome. This woman's name was Sara Kestenbaum. Sara ... remains, in my experience, one of the great exemplars of all that is best about civility.⁴

More than three decades later, the encounter inspired Carter to write his book *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. In it he speaks about the values Sara, an observant Jew, taught him about living in a diverse, multi-ethnic democracy. "Civility creates not merely a negative duty not to do harm," he concludes, "but an affirmative duty to do good."

"An affirmative action to do good." An affirmation of life – even in the face of indifference. Opening our minds to others even against a rising tide of selfishness that erodes the foundations of a civil society. Offering a helping hand, a kind word, an

⁴ <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-20515618/the-etiquette-of-democracy>

open hand even at a time (maybe, most especially at a time) when stridency, audacity and self-interest are the coin of the day.

In the end, this is what averts the severity of life's decree and makes us not just "survivors", but "victors". תשובה *Teshuvah* - turning to the image of Divinity in ourselves and others, as well as in the world, knowing that you and I can be the change we seek. תפילה *T'filah* – finding the inner strength to have hope for a world better than it is now, to not give in to despair, but to find perspective and hope for tomorrow. צדקה *Tzedkah* - giving in the myriad ways we can – with our money, time, effort, a word of kindness or civility – to create a more righteous, justice and equitable world.

Choose life.