

Hope  
Shabbat Shofetim  
Elul 2 5769  
August 21, 2009  
Rabbi David Stern

The shofar has sounded. Elul is here: this month of preparation, of introspection, of sacred opportunity. Yes, it is still summer – judging by the heat index, by people’s travel schedules, even by the fact that the Rangers are in a pennant race. Summer continues, but today Elul began, and with the shofar’s sound, we start to hear the whispers of promise and possibility that might guide us towards a new year.

As many of you know, one of the ways we experience Elul as a community is through a series of Friday night sermons over these next four weeks. Our goal this year is to offer these sermons as a platform for a journey within. As much as this period of preparation and turning is about reaching out to others in seeking and granting forgiveness, this year we want to emphasize the internal process for this journey. So tonight’s sermon is about hope, next week’s about fear, the week after about prayer, and this Elul trajectory will culminate with the visit of a wonderful teacher, Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, who will synthesize and deepen our series on the last Shabbat in Elul, and by leading our Selichot service the following night. It is my prayer that we will make our way together – honest with ourselves, loving with others, on a shared journey towards wholeness.

So since hope is our theme, where else to start than with that great rabbinic sage of Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson:

Hope is a thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all

I want us to start with Dickinson because in those first few lines she manages to capture so much that is elusive and enriching about tonight's theme. First off, she calls hope a "thing" – a matter of substance – real and tachlis and tangible – not some ethereal wisp in the wind. But this substantive thing that sings and never stops – it is a thing with feathers that only perches and soon might fly. And so the hope with which and for which we live – as real as real can be, and sometimes fleeting too. Noble and authentic and true – and sometimes, we worry, only wishful thinking.

But maybe it is not that hope takes flight, but that hope allows us to, hope that lifts us up above the gravitational pull of deep crises and daily cares. Hope that lifts us up in the blessings, unexpected or not, that sing in our days.

A rabbi is blessed to meet hope along the way. In the hospital rooms where the newborn is swaddled, and the parents are exhausted, and the grandparents are elated. Not just joy, but hope – the hope it takes to bring a child into the world, the hope it takes to believe that the world can be hospitable to that most vulnerable life, the hope that that child can make this world-in-progress a better place with the gifts that she will uniquely bring to it. Hope perches right there on the bassinet.

And for the couple under the chupah -- what an act of hope marriage is. That these two, attracted and in love, on the basis of however many years, or months, or weeks they've known one another - will entrust their lives to each other – their greatest aspirations, their greatest vulnerabilities, their bodies, their still growing spirits. To say

to one another, I do not know what either of us will become, but I trust that we can make our way together. To break the glass under that chupah and say I will stand with you on the shattered days too – stand strong in our house of hope, no matter what winds blow through. You can see hope perching in the corner of the chupah, if the video guy would only get out of the way.

And in the other hospital rooms too – not the rooms of new life, but of life shadowed by illness and pain. In those rooms we hope – for healing, for strength, for a return to wellness and life. And even when the news is horrible – when with each biopsy, it’s the worse of the two possibilities that emerges – even then. As one friend once said to me, you keep hoping, but what you hope for changes. Even though it’s always there in the back of your mind, you no longer hope for recovery. But you don’t stop hoping. You hope that the one you love will not be in pain. You hope that the kids will make it in from out of town in time. You hope that what is so good and noble about this person will long and far transcend this fragile and suffering vessel. You hope for one good moment each day – of love, of touch, of understanding, of joy. In my own family and in others, I have been deeply privileged to sense the sacred in rooms where hope should by all accounts have been abandoned long ago. But as I witnessed in a hospital room last week, when one spouse says to another, “Thank you,” and in that moment, a grace note of beauty is added to the world; when one family member says to another, “I forgive you,” and a beautiful note of grace is added to the world -- then we hope for just one more moment, just like that.

It’s not sappy or sloppy this Jewish hope. It has some grit to it. Rabbi Michael Marmor, in this summer’s *Reform Judaism* magazine, marks the distinction between hope

and optimism: “To be optimistic means to believe that everything is heading towards a happy ending. To have hope means to believe that whatever happens, a way of coping and building towards the future may be found ... While optimism is a matter of personality or disposition, hope is a matter of faith.”

The Hebrew word for hope is *tikvah* – and as Rabbi Marmur points out, some connect its etymology to the Hebrew term for a cord, a *kav* – a line that secures us when the seas start to storm, a line that connects heaven and earth, a rope that if we grasp it can help us pull ourselves towards the future. But another word for hope in the Bible, a different form of the same root, is *mikveh* – exactly the same word as the term for a ritual bath. Jeremiah refers to God as *Mikveh Yisrael* – Hope of Israel. And so the Hebrew suggests that too, Rabbi Marmur teaches – hope as a pool of comfort and solace when we need it most.

But Jewish hope at this season is more than mooring, more than a tranquil pool. It not only comforts us, it compels us. Because hope is the necessary premise of everything we will wrestle with for this next month, and the necessary foundation for all the good hard Jewish work of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: the work of *cheshbon hanefesh*, the survey of our souls; the work of *teshuvah*, of repentance and return. All of those noble sounding efforts ring hollow if we do not have what Judaism insists we have: hope in the possibility of change for ourselves and for our world.

When hope perches in Elul, in the context of these coming days of awe, hope means first allowing for the possibility that people can change. Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, when he taught homiletics (the craft of sermon writing) at the Jewish Theological Seminary in NY, used to give a little sermon about the Torah portion of the week each

Monday morning. On Wednesday, a senior student would present his own interpretation of the same biblical text. Rabbi Kaplan was a very demanding and critical instructor, and the students dreaded the ordeal. Once, a student took down verbatim what Dr. Kaplan had said on Monday. When it came that student's turn to explain the passage on Wednesday, he repeated Kaplan's Monday interpretation word for word. At the end of the presentation, Kaplan said: "That's a terrible exposition." The student complained: "But Professor Kaplan, that's exactly what you said Monday." Kaplan replied, "Young man, I have grown since then."

We are too often like that student. We presume that the ones we love, the ones we work with, the ones we nurse anger towards, will stay just the same as they are. We brand them indelibly as selfish, as arrogant, as weak, as meddling. In fact, if they change, it muddies our neat prejudgments, so we prefer that they stay just as they are, so that we can retain an uncomplicatedly rotten picture of them. But hope means letting go of that comfortable cynicism. Hope means broadening our view to make room for people to grow past wherever they were on Monday, and challenging ourselves to do the same.

Judaism's insistence on our God-given potential for renewal doesn't have to do so much with our faith in God, as it does with God's faith in us. It is an indescribable gift, and it is also our tradition's greatest challenge to us. Because Jewish hope is not some wispy, ethereal, pastel colors and unicorns idea. Jewish hope is earthly and demanding. It says that since change is possible, we are not permitted to settle in to the roomy gaps in our own characters. It requires that we make a distinction between the mistakes we have made the lives we have yet to build. It says that the unkind words or the failure to listen with love need not define us – they may be part of who we have been, but they are not all

of who we are. Jewish hope at the new year says that it is time not for magical transformations, but to discover other possibilities, resources of self that we have yet to tap. To discover that we not only have the power to hold grudges, but to let go of them; not only the power to sharpen our tongues, but the power to guard them. Not only the capacity to be petty and mean-spirited, but the capacity to transcend those impulses, and to give more benefit than doubt. Protestant Theologian Paul Tillich wrote: “Nothing is more surprising than the rise of the new within ourselves.” Our rabbis taught that God says of those who make teshuvah at this season: “I regard you as though you had been made this very day – as though on this day I had brought you into being as a newly made creature.” As new as the baby in the bassinet – Jewish hope with the awakening and summoning power of a shofar blast.

And hope at this season means we stand before a God who is ready to forgive our own failings. Our rabbis teach that our heartfelt return moves God from the throne of judgment to the throne of mercy. The earnestly seeking human heart moves the heart of God. God is saving cord and comforting waters and challenging possibilities all at once. Our hope wherever we seek healing from our own pain, our own sense of loss, the hope to shed some light on the darkness in which we sometimes walk. Psalm 27, on which we focus throughout this coming month, ends with the words, *v'kaveh el adonai* – variously translated as “Look to the Lord,” or “Wait for the Lord” – but it’s all the same root: *kaveh* – *tikvah* – hope: hope towards, hope with, our God.

My father’s backyard in Western Massachusetts is perfect for soccer and frisbee, except for this one tree. A hill slopes down from the back deck of the house, and levels out in a perfect rectangle backing up to the woods. And right in the middle of that

rectangle there is this beautiful maple tree. It could not be more inconveniently placed. And how we love that tree.

We call it Matthew's tree. It is named for Matthew Smoler, a Confirmation kid from my father's congregation who died of a brain tumor when he was seventeen. When he died, his mother asked my father what gift she could give to my dad in Matthew's memory, and he asked for this maple tree for their new home. When it was a sapling, it wasn't so much in the way. And now it could not be more in the way. Hope is like that. Sometimes it provides shelter. Sometimes it makes you alter your path. Sometimes it even feels inconvenient. But in the end, we would have it no other way. Because in the end, what was once a sapling grows, and gains color and life. In the end, we plant in the face of our losses, and add a little bit more beauty to the world. In the end, we thank God for the Matthews, for their trees, and for the hope that God has planted in each and every one of us. May that gift of hope flourish and grow in every human soul – feathers and all – in a new month, and a new year, of great blessing. Amen.