

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5775 “Do Not Despair”

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To be honest, I'm not really sure which straw broke the camel's back for me this summer. The war in Israel and Gaza was devastating enough. But...I think maybe it was the metastasized cancer that is ISIS. Who knew that there could be an evil so evil Al Qaeda would reject it for being too evil? Or maybe it was the insanity of the Cold War reprisal in Ukraine. Pile that on top of the worst ebola outbreak in human history, civil unrest in Missouri that brought racism in America back to the forefront, and the California drought that feels like the first harbinger of climate change... whatever it was... at some point, I think that we collectively crossed the threshold of despair.

The usual angst of world tragedy morphed into a feeling that we're dealing with a whole new level of violence and destruction. It felt like the world fundamentally hit a new shade of dark red on a scale of alarm.

I heard a lot of despair... from friends, from family, from congregants... throwing our hands up, shutting down. Turning off the news alerts on the phone. Popping in that old Beatles cd from the glove compartment instead of the usual NPR on the morning commute. It got to be too much... and without any clear options for making it better, despair seemed like the best option.

But I recently heard a TED talk that helped to snap me out of my malaise. I didn't believe it when I first heard it. But when I watched Steven Pinker's full talk, he's more than compelling in his argument that....

We are probably living at the most peaceful time in our species' existence. Yup. Hard to believe, but we are at the least violent moment in the entirety of human history. I won't be able to do his talk justice without all of the spreadsheets and slides, but he argues that even with the world wars and genocides of the 20th century, statistically, people were less likely to die at the hands of another person than at any other point in history. And since 1945, violence has declined even further.

It doesn't seem right. The world FEELS more violent because we SEE more of it. Technology and social media gives us instantaneous access to the most gruesome depictions of the worst conflicts and evil around the world. But there's not more violence and evil. We're just seeing more of what's out there.

If that's true... if Steven Pinker is right, then any sense of despair we feel is not about the condition of the world. It's about us – our own reaction... our own paralysis.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav felt that paralysis when faced with the woes of his era. He lived in 18th century Ukraine, arguably a more violent place than 21st century Ukraine... at least for Jews. Jews were poor and despised. Pogroms consistently burned their homes and left many beaten... or worse. Nachman was the great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, one of the most important rabbis in history. And as his great-grandson, he was in line to inherit the position of spiritual leadership. But Nachman didn't want it. It felt more like a weight than an honor. "Who was he to lead an oppressed people?" He asked.

And this burden threw him into a long, bleak dark, clouded depression. He did what he knew how to do. He prayed... begging God for the strength to lead. That strength did not come.

As a last ditch effort, not wanting to let his community down, he got on a ship and set off for the Holy Land. Surely, the revelation he had been seeking would come once he stepped foot into that sacred soil. Surely, God could not ignore him there.

But there was no revelation. No magic wand, no panacea for his woes. He came to Israel for inner strength and found no transformation – only utter hopelessness and despair. There was nowhere else in the world to look for the strength and conviction he needed to lead. So he stopped looking. He got on the ship and headed home. He opened his door, fell to the ground... and just sat with himself. With nowhere else in the world to turn, he turned inward – shutting out the world. But when he peered into his own soul expecting to find only the void of absolute darkness that he felt, he saw a single spark. And that single spark was a revelation. Not all is dark – there is light inside of you. If there is even a hint of light, then despair is not an option.

Lo tit'ya-esh - Assur l'hit'ya-esh – ‘Don't despair. It is forbidden to despair.’ It was the message he needed to hear for himself. So it was the message he gave to his followers. “I have been there. I have felt that darkness.” But that darkness is not all that exists. Gradually, he fought off his own despair... he ignited that spark within himself by fighting the despair of others. No matter how dark the world seemed around him, he could grow that spark in himself and in others.

He was not going to be able to singlehandedly stop the pogroms. He was not going to be able to lift his people out of poverty. But his act was tremendously significant. In choosing not to despair for himself, he built hope for his people – he breathed life into Judaism. And that hope sustained people through the lows to prepare them for the moments of historical opportunity generations later. Nachman’s memory and teachings continue to inspire Jews around the world and give meaning to their lives. The change started within him – with his decision for himself not to despair.

There’s another story about overcoming despair that you may have heard from this very bema in the past. It’s a well-known story – a woman and her friend are walking along the shore and every time they pass a starfish the woman bends down, picks it up and throws it back to the ocean. Finally, her friend asks her, “Why bother? You’re not making much of a difference.” “Maybe not,” she replies. “but it makes a world of difference to this one.” The moral we all know- every little bit counts.

Yet there’s another moral embedded in this story that doesn’t get the attention it deserves. In picking up that final starfish, throwing it in the water, and telling her friend, “it makes a world of difference to this one,” her act of transformation is not only for the starfish. The act of transformation is also for her friend –taking her despair and replacing it with hope. And the significance of this transformation cannot be underestimated.

The friend tells this story to another... and another and another... and soon enough, we have this ubiquitous story told at some point in every synagogue and

church across the country... inspiring thousands. In refusing to despair for herself, the woman modeled hope for others. Her choice of hope over despair... inspires.

On the high holidays we talk about transforming ourselves and transforming the world around us. And though we sometimes talk of these things separately, they could not be more deeply intertwined. If you ask any social worker, any expert in family systems, we live our lives as a large interconnected machine. When we change our actions, we are tinkering with a gear in the interconnected machine. And when you tinker with one gear, the rest of the machine is impacted as well. The whole has to adjust to respond to the change of the part. By transforming ourselves, we start to transform the world around us.

Rabbi Israel Salanter claimed, "When I was young, I wanted to change the world. I tried, but the world did not change. Then I tried to change my town, but the town did not change. Then I tried to change my family, but my family did not change. Then I knew. First I must change myself." The rest will follow.

Overcoming our own personal despair may seem small, but it has the power to set into motion a cosmic chain reaction... the spiritual equivalent of a butterfly flapping its wings in Japan triggering desert rains in New Mexico.

We must choose to act – break our paralysis, choose from the thousands of worthy causes and throw our lot in with hope, not despair. I would imagine that in the wake of this summer, many of us feel what Rabbi Nachman felt... asked ourselves what's the point. We need a nudge to reaffirm our faith in the potential of humanity. We need to be reminded of that dormant spark in ourselves. Consider the high holidays to be that nudge. That nudge is contained within our theme... if not now, when?

And if you need an extra kick-start of hope, if you need a Rebbe Nachman to tell you it's forbidden to despair or a starfish-throwing friend to get you up, I have to tell you that personally, I found my inspiration from the many members of this congregation who are deeply engaged throughout the community – serving on countless boards and putting in hundreds of volunteer hours. Emanuel members are fighting homelessness in LA, preventing genocide in Sudan, building community in Beverly Hills and creating access to clean water in Burma. They have inspired me. And I want them to inspire all of us.

In the back of the room, there is a card with a number of hope-inspiring projects that already have a solid core of Temple Emanuel members at the helm. They want your passion. They want your talent. They want your spark. Pick up a card as you're walking out, check the box that most interests you and join them in their work. Our staff will be at the door to collect them. At Temple Emanuel, we know that fighting despair, that community engagement starts not with the rabbi on the bema but with the spark in each member of the community that refuses to despair.

The world may be messed up and we may see more darkness than not. But we cannot succumb to the darkness no matter how overwhelming it may seem. Darkness is not the whole truth. Sometimes, seeing darkness is a choice. Because when you peer long enough into the darkness as Rebbe Nachman did, you will find that spark of light. And when you see your own spark, you can help others see theirs. And with all of our sparks joined together, we can drive out the darkness.

So, Rebbe Nachman... know that centuries later, you continue to inspire. We hear you. "It is forbidden to despair." It is forbidden to despair... and you have helped us choose hope.