

## When You Believe – Finding Hope, Love and Faith

Kol Nidre Sermon – Makom NY  
Friday, October 11, 2024 at 7:30pm  
Rabbi Deborah K. Bravo

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:  
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹ וְנָהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם  
וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:  
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי אֹר וַיְהי־אֹר:  
וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחָשֶׁךְ:  
וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחָשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה  
וַיְהי־עֶרֶב וַיְהי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד:

On the very first day of the creation of the world, when the earth was unformed and void, there was darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water. God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day and called the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

We read this story from the very beginning of Genesis on Rosh Hashanah – how powerful the words of this story are THIS YEAR.

Darkness this year. It started with darkness. October 7<sup>th</sup>. Come to be known as the Black Shabbat, for a curtain of darkness lay over the Jewish world. Immediately from the darkness, on the very first day of creation, God gave us the gift of light.

We don’t really know how long that first day lasted in creation – darkness seems to last forever when it comes upon us – we call it a day, but it could have been a week, a month, even years, and the very next act, was turning darkness into light. It’s in the very beginning of the Torah, and it is what we Jews do. Over and over and over again.

We rise up out of shiva and find at least a little bit of light. The Israelites left the darkness of Egypt and eventually found their way to the light of Eretz Yisrael. In the darkest moments of the year, the Hebrew month of Kislev, our December, we celebrate the festival of lights, Chanukah. And at the conclusion of the ten days of repentance, when we have been searching our souls, going through our darkest thoughts and feelings, we find our way to the Yom HaKippurim – the holiest of days, the day that brings light from the darkness.

You might question – what about Yom Kippur sheds light on darkness? Yes, Yom Kippur is a somber day. Yes, it is a day when we remember our family and loved ones who have died. Yes, it is a hard day – we need to do the work, discover to whom and how to apologize, to ask for repentance from God, and to ask for forgiveness of ourselves.

And... unburdening some of the pain and difficulty of the year, letting go of our wrong doings, there is something freeing and even joyful when we wipe the slate clean, and begin anew. The Mishna, containing

quotes from our rabbis from thousands of years ago, says that Yom Kippur is a day of joy, in fact, one of the two happiest days of the year. This surprises most people, since it is a day spent praying and fasting, apologizing and contemplating, a day when we set aside the things that typically bring us physical enjoyment.

But the Talmud explains the happiness and joy of the day is precisely because it is a day of forgiveness for our misdeeds. There is an opportunity to begin our lives afresh, free from the mistakes and wrongdoings of the past. It's actually an incredible opportunity to go back in time and change history, our history.

So, I by no means think that we are feeling joy this year. It has been a tough year.

As I shared on Rosh Hashanah, it has been unbearable, uncomfortable. We have all felt the collective sadness that has permeated the Jewish world since October 7<sup>th</sup>. Today, we must see the light that has come from the darkness. We wish we didn't need it, we wish it wasn't so, but we Jews have long understood that some things are beyond our ability to change or alter, and so... we have learned to bring light when there is darkness.

So how do we find light amid all of the darkness - here is what I believe, from the bottom of my soul, is the vehicle to light for the Jewish people: love, hope and faith. Alone each of these ideas is powerful and can bring comfort, but together, together love, hope and faith can help us to move from the darkest moments in history to a place of light.

Listen – I'm not going to sugar coat anything this year – this has been the most challenging year for Jews since the Holocaust. We have been brutally murdered, raped, tortured. We have been in mourning, trying to heal, attempting to move past shock to some new sense of normalcy. We have been the victims of antisemitism and hatred around the world. And yet, we MUST find a way from darkness to light, and today is the day. We may not feel a typical sense of joy from Yom Kippur this day, for even the lightening of our souls does not free the captives nor protect the soldiers nor end antisemitism, but perhaps, throughout this day, the focus on repentance, love, hope and faith might bring a little bit of light into our souls, enough to keep us going until more light is found.

I want to begin with **love**. It is not necessarily a word we associate with Yom Kippur, let alone with Judaism, but it is very much the basis of our faith. We learn early on in the Torah the commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We learn about love between human beings, love for animals, and of course, love for God. Love is very much a part of the Holiness Code that is found in the Book of Leviticus.

So why don't Jews talk much about love? Just because we don't talk about it doesn't mean we don't believe in it. We Jews don't talk much about the afterlife because our rabbis taught us to focus on life, on living. But it doesn't mean we don't believe. Perhaps the same is true with love. The concept of love very much permeates everything we do as Jews.

To counter the notion that Jews don't really focus on love, Rabbi Shai Held recently wrote a book entitled Judaism is About Love. As a leading scholar and respected rabbi, Held describes that Judaism not only embraces the emotion of love, but it is a foundation of our faith and our purpose. The kind of love Judaism

speaks about is not an emotion or an action, but both, emotion and action, partnered together. It is a way to orient one's self to life. It is a disposition.

There is much to discuss about Judaism and love: the dictum to love one's neighbor is right up at the top of the list, and it would be a worthy topic for a sermon on its own, but it is not this year's sermon, it can't be. This particular year I simply want to simply say this. Our God, the Jewish God, the one we are questioning and arguing with and wondering about, especially today on Yom Kippur, especially THIS year, this God IS a God of love.

When describing our Jewish God, and yes, that is a thing - for this is the God that WE, the Jewish people, pray to, repent to, argue with, yell at, dialogue with, wrestle with and turn to for support at the most challenging of times - our Jewish God is in fact a God of love. We might think that our God is simply a God of power, the God of the Torah, who created us and all the world, who freed us from Egypt, led us to the Promised Land, and that this power is what makes God worthy of our prayers and our supplications. Or we might believe that God is the God of knowledge, the all-knowing, ever-present God, who can see our actions and hear our thoughts.

Yes, our God is a God of power and a God of knowledge, but ultimately, our God is a God of love. What makes God God is, as Rabbi Held describes, "that God's love is unfathomably vast, vaster and greater than anything human beings can imagine, let alone embody. What makes God God, in other words, is the depth, steadfastness and extent of God's love."<sup>1</sup>

Today, Yom Kippur, is perhaps the best proof-text for God being a God of Love. It is because of God's great and everlasting love that God can listen to our pleas, God can hear our requests and God can forgive us in a way that humans are not capable of forgiving. That forgiveness shows God's love. And since Judaism and our God are very much connected, Judaism must be about love as well.

So why am I choosing to discuss God's love, and the Jewish understanding of love, on THIS Yom Kippur? Because if you are anything like me, you have been wondering – where has God been this past year? Where has God been as the Jewish world has been torn down, physically, mentally and emotionally? Where has God been in my personal challenges, in our communal trials and tribulations?

Not to be cliché but... I have seen love in so many places this year.

- I have seen love every Sunday morning, as an entire community was created to support the hostages and their families.
- I have seen love as people picked up from all over the world to travel to Israel, some for days, many for weeks and some even for months, to help pick vegetables because the regular workers are no longer in the country, and the regular Israelis are fighting a war on multiple fronts.
- I have seen love as this community has gathered together time and time and time again, in large numbers, mainly Jews but with non-Jews as well, from all different backgrounds, holding each other, loving one another – to pray, sing and cry together for peace in Israel, for the safe return of the hostages and for the protection of the soldiers.

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<sup>1</sup> Judaism is About Love by Rabbi Shai Held, page 265.

But love is not enough this year. It is something, it is important, but it is not enough. Love must be partnered with **hope**. Hope is what we Jews are good at – most of the time. For over 2,000 years we have continued to hope for a better today, for a better tomorrow....

Even in the darkest days over this past year, even on this day, Yom Kippur, the hardest Yom Kippur in many of our lifetimes, there is a voice of hope within each of us – hope for healing, hope for return, hope for renewal, hope for recovery, hope for rebuilding, hope for ourselves, for our children, for our people, for Israel and for the world.

Perhaps the quintessential moment of hope in the Torah occurs during the story of the Burning Bush. In this story, when Moses asks God for God's name, God responds by saying - *eheyeh asher eheyeh* – I will be what I will be. This one line is what makes Judaism unique. From that moment on, God assures us that there is hope in a tomorrow. Some people even define it to mean: I will be what tomorrow demands – again, a hope and a promise for a better tomorrow.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom wrote, “To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story, every element of Jewish law, is a protest against escapism, resignation or the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism is a sustained struggle, the greatest ever known, against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet. There is no more challenging vocation. Throughout history, when human beings have sought hope, they have found it in the Jewish story. Judaism is the religion, and Israel the home of hope.”<sup>2</sup>

Even the national anthem of Israel, written in back 1897 and officially adopted as the country's national anthem in 2004, speaks of this hope.

As long as Jewish spirit  
Yearns deep in the heart,  
With eyes turned East,  
Looking towards Zion.  
Our hope is not yet lost,  
The hope of two millennia,  
To be a free people in our land,  
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

Hope is complex. It's a feeling. It's an action. It's in our hearts. It's in our souls. Have you ever had the experience of having a difficult day, and something completely disconnected to that day happens, giving you renewed hope in people, in a better tomorrow? It can be the simplest things that give us hope. The key to hope is being able to see it, name it and own it.

A few weeks ago, I reached out to our good friend Yael, who lives in Jerusalem. Like many Israelis, this has been an unimaginable year. She didn't lose immediate family members on October 7<sup>th</sup>, but it is Israel –

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in [www.myJewishLearning.com](http://www.myJewishLearning.com)

everyone is family. Like everyone in Israel, Yael's whole reality changed that day. And like all Israelis, there is only one degree of separation between her and the extreme loss and mourning felt through Israel.

Yael's husband was called back to reserves on October 7<sup>th</sup>, arriving in the South within hours of the attack, witnessing some of the most horrific scenes imaginable, dropping his law practice and serving for more than 9 months. And he is awaiting a call at any time to return, this time to the North. Yael's oldest daughter began her military service just weeks before October 7<sup>th</sup>, and has been stationed in the South.

Over the past year, Yael and I have spoken much more than normal. I think she couldn't really share her innermost thoughts with her family, neighbors and friends, because it would have felt burdensome, and they all had too many burdens. So I, like many Americans have done for their Israel friends and family, became her 'person'. I checked in with Yael just before Rosh Hashanah, to see how they were doing and her response to me was that "she was worried from what is yet to come, but our hope is keeping us strong."

I was amazed by this response, and yet, this IS who the Jewish people are. I questioned her about her hope, and this is what she said: I feel that there's nothing logic about hope. Hope is a protection mechanism and a remedy. Maybe we don't have a choice but to be hopeful. If I wouldn't have hope that things will get better, I wouldn't go out of bed in the morning. Hope allows me to keep going and, in a way, to stick my head in the sand while reality is exploding above me."

Friends, love and hope are incredibly important in this challenging moment in time. And... the ingredient I believe that is necessary to 'move on' is that of **faith**. I know... I have heard it time and time again throughout my rabbinate, that people lose faith when terrible things happen. I truly understand. Many a great book has been written about this. And yet, I am going to challenge us to say – we NEED to have faith. It shouldn't be blind faith, or distant faith, but it should be active faith, and faith that allows us to yell, beg, plea, question and forgive.

There is a phrase in Judaism that I began grappling with 22 years ago, and it led me on a path of questioning and understanding that made my faith even stronger. 22 years ago, I was pregnant with our first child. On Yom Kippur in 2002, I stood on the bimah 8-months pregnant, and I preached about God and our need to have faith. And then the unimaginable happened – I delivered a full-term still born. That is a story not for tonight, though I am always willing to talk about it, but it was the worst day, and week, and month of our lives.

Some people came to me and said – it must have been God's will that this happened – you know the phrase – im yirtzah ha-Shem – God-willing? I spend the better part of that year thinking, reading, praying, in weekly grief therapy, and ultimately, I preached a sermon the following Rosh Hashanah entitled "God-Willing".

I decided – God did NOT will this horrific event to happen to me, to David, to our family. God did NOT want the unimaginable to impact a young family, at the beginning stages of life. The same way God did not will the bad and challenge and struggle that has come into your lives. No, God was not a vengeful God. God was full of compassion, and wisdom and love.

We named our daughter Batya, meaning daughter of God. We celebrate her life that might have been every year on her yartzeit, and I cannot explain why she didn't live, but I can tell you that God and I had a lot of tough conversations that year. And my faith in God was only stronger by the end.

Friends, faith is a funny thing – when we need it most is when we tend to push it away. Yom Kippur is all about faith – faith that God will hear our pleas, faith that God will help us to get rid of our sins, faith that God will renew us for blessing in the Book of Life. It doesn't always work out the way we want, but that is not God's will, that is sometimes the way the world crumbles. And then we pick ourselves up again, and with God by our side, we move on, from the unimaginable to a world that shows kindness through love, hope and faith.

In these dark days, may our love exude, may our hope rise for a better tomorrow, and may our faith grow stronger, because we need it, now more than ever.

### **'When You Believe' from Prince of Egypt**

Many nights we prayed  
With no proof, anyone could hear  
In our hearts a hope for a song  
We barely understood  
Now we are not afraid  
Although we know there's much to fear  
We were moving mountains  
Long before we knew we could, whoa, yes  
There can be miracles  
When you believe  
Though hope is frail, it's hard to kill  
Who knows what miracles you can achieve?  
When you believe, somehow you will  
You will when you believe  
Oh-oh-oh  
Mmm, yeah  
In this time of fear  
When prayer so often proves in vain  
Hope seems like the summer bird  
Too swiftly flown away  
Yet now I'm standing here  
My hearts so full, I can't explain  
Seeking faith and speakin' words  
I never thought I'd say  
There can be miracles  
When you believe (When you believe)  
Though hope is frail, it's hard to kill (Mmm)

Who knows what miracles you can achieve? (You can achieve)  
When you believe, somehow you will  
You will when you believe  
They don't always happen when you ask  
And it's easy to give in to your fears  
But when you're blinded by your pain  
Can't see the way, get through the rain  
A small but still, resilient voice  
Says, help is very near, oh (Oh)  
There can be miracles (Miracles)  
When you believe (Boy, when you believe, yeah)  
Though hope is frail  
It's hard to kill (Hard to kill, oh, yeah)  
Who knows what miracles  
You can achieve (You can achieve, oh)  
When you believe somehow you will (Somehow, somehow, somehow)  
Now, you will (I know, I know, know)  
You will when you (When you)  
Believe  
You will when you (You will when you)  
Believe  
Just believe (Believe)  
Just believe  
You will when you  
Believe