

Hoping More, and Less

Yom Kippur Sermon 5783

I'm about to open a Pandora's box.

Have you ever heard someone say that? What comes next probably isn't good.

The reference is to a Greek creation myth. As the story goes, men were created first, but the gods grew bored with that state of affairs. So, they decided to create the first woman, imbuing her with all of their greatest attributes: wisdom, charisma, beauty...and they named her Pandora. Now when Pandora went to earth, she brought along some serious baggage: a box that Zeus had filled with every imaginable evil: death, disease, hatred, envy, and probably, most of the popular social media platforms.

Pandora did not know what was in the box; and she was instructed not to open it under any circumstances. Everything was perfect at first — until, of course, her curiosity got the better of her. She decided to take just one little peak. With the gentle flick of a latch, the box flung open, and everything spiraled into chaos: rivalries arose, wars began; people started enslaving and conquering and killing one another.

Yet, one thing remained at the bottom of the box: an antidote to all of these ills: and that one thing was hope.^{1//}

As I tell this story, perhaps your mind wandered into the Garden of Eden, the Jewish analogue. The two stories share striking similarities: an edenic setting; a dramatic undoing of perfection due to human error. (They also have in common that the trouble starts when women first enter the picture, leading me to wonder if some comparative feminist critique might not be warranted.)

But the version in the Torah doesn't end with hope, the presumed antidote to these evils. No, in that Genesis account of creation, God swiftly banishes Adam and Eve, leaving them with the stark consequences: Women will suffer in childbirth, and men will have to toil at back-breaking labor simply to eat. Finally, God informs them that they will now be mortal, one day to return to the dust from which they came.² End of story.

Both stories speak hard truths of the human condition: we are frail. We give in to temptation. Our baser instincts can be terribly destructive.

¹ See Manson, Mark. *Everything Is F*CKED: A Book about Hope*. HARPER, 2021, pp. 124-125 based on Hesiod's *Work and Days*, lines 560-612

² Gen 3.16-19.

On this evening, our liturgy speaks of the book of life, and we know it is all too real: one day, we and everyone we love will live no more.

At least the Greek version ends with a *nechemta*, a little uplift, with that hope sitting in the bottom of the chest, ready for us to lift it out when we really need it.

Or does it? Apparently the ancient Greek word for hope, *elpis*, can also be translated as “deceptive expectation.”³⁴ So, depending on how you read the story, hope is either lying in that box to save us from despair; or else, it’s yet another dark force in Pandora’s box, filling our lives with discord.

So which is it? Well, perhaps both. I am not going to tell you tonight that hope will save us from all of life’s miseries. In fact, sometimes I think we need to hope a little less, and act a little more.//

When I was a tour educator for teenagers in Eastern Europe, I told them the story of Hugo Gryn, who survived Auschwitz-Birkenau to become a beloved rabbi:

On the Eve of Chanukah in 1944, they were still enduring the misery of the camps. Hugo’s father turned a homemade clay bowl into a makeshift menorah and lit a wick immersed in his precious, now melted ration of margarine. Before he could recite the blessing, Hugo looked at his father and protested: But father, “we need the food – we can’t afford to waste it on a candle.”

His father turned his weathered face toward Hugo and then back to the lamp—and responded, “You and I have seen that it is impossible to live up to two weeks without food. We once lived for two days without water; but you can’t live for even two minutes without hope.”

Without hope, we die a sort of spiritual death. We give in to despair. Life loses its meaning.

³ (Manson, p. 256)

⁴ According to linguistic scholar Cherice Block: “The Greek word we translate “hope” is *elpis*, ἐλπίς (noun), or *elpizo*, ἐλπίζω (verb). In classical Greek literature, *elpis* can be used as an expectation of the future in either a positive or a negative way, as opposed to our usual understanding when we use the term “hope” in English (anticipating something positive).”

(<https://chericeblock.com/2016/04/23/hope-in-ancient-greek-pandora-and-the-greek-goddess-elpis/>). So too, Thayer: “Rarely in a bad sense, expectation of evil, fear; as, *hē tōn kakōn elpis*, Lucian, Tyrannic. c. 3; *tou fobou elpis*, Thucydides 7, 61; *kakē elpis*, Plato, rep. 1, p. 330 e. (cf. legg. 1, p. 644 c. at the end); *ponēra elpis* Isa. 28:19, the Septuagint.”

In a recent book, an intriguing new thinker named Mark Manson distills research in sociology and psychology to propose that there are three things a human beings need to build and maintain hope:

1. A sense of autonomy;
2. A belief in the value of something; and
3. A community.

Control. Values. And Community.

Amidst the horrors of the Shoah, that tiny margarine ration in the menorah represented all three of these. The tremendous sacrifice of a starving father came to show they had some little control over their circumstances, even if primarily psychological. That sacrifice elevated the value of their lives, their people; their beloved community and tradition. For Hugo and his father, this tiny act of defiance reaffirmed that their lives had purpose. Even in the pit of darkness and death, they had something to live for.

But here's the thing: kindling that flame was not just a feeling, not just a prayer; it was an act of defiance, a sacrificial act. I believe that this is the essence of how Judaism views hope.

The Hebrew word for hope is *tikvah*, which famously lends its name to Israel's national anthem - *Ha-Tikvah* - THE Hope. Like many Hebrew words, it comes from a three-letter root whose meanings can be quite revealing. Its base meaning seems to be a cord or rope. And this is where I get to share a teaching by Rabbi Offner, who a few years ago asked in a sermon:

"So what does a rope have to do with hope? We find our answer in the book of Joshua, when Rahab, the Canaanite woman who lived in Jericho, helped save the two Jewish scouts by lowering them down the walls of Jericho with a rope."

"... [She then tied a *tikvat chut hashani*], a scarlet rope [to her window, a sign of protection]. [We see two ropes in the story] saved the lives of the scouts. Given that story, it is easy now to see the relationship between hope and a rope. The rope is a lifeline. It is that thing we grip when we need to be pulled up to a better place or lowered down to a safer one. Hope is our lifeline."

Also like a rope, I think, hope is not a passive instrument. It requires exertion to climb out to safety. It's like that story of the pious man who stays in his house during a horrible flood. Rescuers in a boat come by but he declines their help, saying "God will save me." So the water breaches his house and he goes up to the roof. Then, a helicopter comes

by, and they throw him down the rope-ladder. Yet, again he declines, saying “God will save me.” The waters rise further and further until the man drowns. When the angels come to escort him into the next world, he cries out in shock, why didn’t God save me? And they respond — you fool, God sent you a boat and a helicopter with a rope-ladder. You only needed to grab hold of the rope.

Friends, in these last few years who among us hasn’t felt exasperation hinging on despair? The pandemic disrupted our lives, striking all of our families with loss and grief. War and discord fill the world. It feels as though the soul of our nation is riven in two. Things feel sick, and hard, and dark.

But the truth is that the world has always felt this way. Sure, the nature of the hardship changes, but every generation has its trials. Early in the pandemic, I conducted a funeral for a beloved matriarch, 103 years of age. She lived during World War I, the Spanish Flu, the Great Depression, World War II, The Cuban Missile Crisis, The Vietnam War, Both Gulf Wars, September 11th, and another pandemic, more than a century later. In her lifetime, Israel was a dream, and then a reality, and then nearly wiped off the map — back and forth; over and again.

And that’s just in one human lifetime.

If we’re worried that the world is going to hell in a handbasket then it might help to remember that the world has always been going to hell in a handbasket.

“Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory.”

- Franklin Pierce Adams

“Every generation thinks it's the last, thinks it's the end of the world”

- Jeff Tweedy

To be clear, I do not wish to discount the enormity of what we are facing. The world is full of suffering. Our lives, inevitably, will be touched by suffering. In some cases, far too much suffering. The pain is real, and true. But there’s this truth, also: we are in so many ways, better off as a human family than we have ever been. Suffering is the cost of leaving the garden; that is the consequence of opening Pandora’s box. In short, we pay a price for living among other fully imperfect beings with free will and weakness.

When we hope too much, too abstractly, in the face of this weakness, we doom ourselves to disappointment. Ironically, this type of hope leads us further toward despair.

But when we hope concretely — with our arms and legs, in our spirits and in our promises — we prove that there is not only weakness, but strength also. As Herzl said, *im tirtzu, ein zo aggadah*: If you will it, it is no longer a myth. Change is possible if we dare to make it so.

Hope has one more Hebrew meaning I'd like to share with you tonight. Have you heard the word *mikveh* or "mikvah?" It's from the same Hebrew root as *tikvah*. You might know that a *mikveh* is a Jewish ritual bath. In that word, the very same Hebrew root as "hope" means "gathering" — mikveh is a gathering of waters, each drop combining with countless others to form a nourishing, holy water that literally holds us up through life's trials and transitions. Susan and I both went to the *mikveh* before we got married. The mikveh is a place of hope and identity affirmation for a *ger*, a convert to the Jewish people. It can be a profound spiritual experience. And it's only possible through a gathering, a merging of energy that holds us.

And isn't that just like hope? It takes a merging of voices, minds, and hearts to build hope — in short, a community. We need each other.

In the Warsaw Ghetto, during the Holocaust there was a tiny synagogue, the Lubavitcher Shtiebel, over which hung a sign: Jews don't despair.

We don't despair, because we have one another. Like the delicate fibers intertwined in a rope; like droplets of water which draw together in a mighty tide, we need one another. We are stronger together. We build hope by acting together. When we come together we ARE *beit Tikvah* - the house of hope, the place where all may come to know that together we make a difference, and that within our walls or wherever we may gather, no one will be alone.