

Two inmates, father and son, are sitting in the cold winter in the barracks of Auschwitz. The father has found a little scrap of metal to create a small menorah and a tiny bit of butter to use for the oil. He took a thread from his already fraying prison uniform and created a wick for the hanukkah candles. He was determined to celebrate the holiday of light, even in the hell and darkness of Auschwitz. Hugo, his son, protested: "Shouldn't we eat the butter? What if we are found out? His father's wisdom was something Hugo would never forget. Looking into his son's eyes, he explained: "Hugo, both you and I know that a person can live a very long time without food. We are already skin and bones, but a person cannot live a single day without hope."  
[1]

Rabbi Hugo Gryn lived this story, and taught this profound lesson throughout the rest of his life.

Rabbi Gryn's story is just one of the many heroic tales of hope and resilience throughout Jewish history. We are the forever "dying people." In each generation, scholars worry about the fate of Judaism, and yet we are so resilient. We are resilient because we carry with us hope.

Hope is ingrained in our people, in our tradition, that the great Rabbi Jonathan Sachs describes "To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Every ritual, every mitzvah, 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.”

But what do we do when the home of hope itself is in peril? When we see rockets launched into Israel; When we watch, helpless, as a cease-fire deal that would release hostages collapses at the last minute; When we overhear a colleague at work who can't understand why Jews are so upset; The campus protester carrying a sign that says Zionist are native to Hell; When our social media feeds are filled with friends and family arguing about the fate of Israel, the election in November and so much more. How do you stop yourself from spinning out and focusing on the worst of human behavior? How can you stop a cycle of anger and fear? How do we find hope?

This year as I have struggled, I keep Rabbi Wolpe's wisdom in mind. Rabbi Wolpe, a colleague, who served on Harvard's antisemitism advisory committee, was asked on a panel, "Rabbi, what gives you hope?" and his response was remarkable. "I imagine myself in a conversation with my great great great grandfather and I say to him it's terrible what I'm seeing at Harvard... and he says you're at Harvard? and I say yes, yes... but there's a lot of antisemitism and anti Israel sentiments there. And he goes there's an Israel? and I said yeah but you should hear, the administration is talking about shaving some of the billions of dollars of aid that goes there, and America is giving billions of dollars of aid to Israel? and I said you know what You're right we have problems but great great great grandparents. We are very very blessed."

What if every time we heard the news, we pretended we were talking to our great great great grandparent... what would their perspective be?

I ask myself: What can I be grateful for? My children. This community. Here I am, a woman, on this pulpit, in this country freely leading and freely worshipping.

This is the same sanctuary that overflowed during a solidarity service two days after October 7th because our community comes together to support each other. Even in a year like this.

The heartbreak of October 7th. The division in the Jewish community about the best way forward and Israel's decisions. The trauma that reminds us of other traumas: the 2014 JCC shooting and our own family stories of flight and survival.

Yet even among the innumerable stories of pain and suffering. There are also other stories of the many small acts of resilience and hope that stir my soul and move me beyond words. We look at Hersh Goldberg Polin's parents, American Israelis who have been speaking and pleading with the media and politicians all day every day, to help bring their son home after he was taken from the Re'im music festival. And even when they learned the devastating news that Hersh was executed, they still found the strength to speak out for the other hostages and for peace.

I hear them, and I know that they are some of the strongest people we will ever see. There were thousands who attended Hersh's funeral. People who felt like they knew him. And then for shiva, the Goldberg-Polins accepted condolences from under a tent across the street from their home. His mother's words will forever echo in our minds. She said at her son's funeral, "[Hersch] help shower us with healing and resilience. Help us to rise again."

Rabbi Samantha Kahn, out of FL teaches: that there have been so many moments throughout Jewish history when the problems we were facing might have led others to declare that the situation was hopeless. But hopelessness is more than just a statement that things are tough; it is a decision that there is no possible way for it to get even the slightest bit better. This is so incompatible with our tradition that there is actually no word in Hebrew that means “hopeless,” because we *never* lose hope completely. We are never ready to give up the fight for a better world, for healing, for transformation, for *teshuva*. We believe that healing is *always* possible. Even when we reach the limits of our physical healing, Judaism provides the blueprint for spiritual healing.

In this moment, we can't let our fear and our pain prevent us from continuing to enjoy life. We must continue to leave our homes, to go to music festivals and to rejoice with one another.

The Israelite women fled Egypt with timbrels in their hands. Take a moment to consider how outrageous this is. They left in such a rush that they didn't even let their bread bake completely. They left with only what they could carry on their backs: each item a thoughtful, heavy, choice. And yet, even with so much uncertainty and fear, the women packed timbrels - why?

The Midrash teaches- they wholeheartedly believed that there would be reason to celebrate. Bringing a timbrel while fleeing for your life is an act of faith, an act of hope. Like the story of the menorah in Auschwitz, our commitment to light in dark moments is as essential to our soul as food is to our bodies. Our text teaches us that we must carry hope with us, even when we enter the desert with nothing but unleavened bread."

It's hard for me to give a sermon on hope this year. I wrote this sermon in the chemo room at MDAnderson with my mom. The harsh smell of antiseptic and the incessant beeping of hospital equipment surrounding us.

Out of the blue 18 months ago my mother was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia. About two months ago she relapsed and has been taking part in an Israeli clinical trial for a very aggressive, ugly cancer mutation. Her prognosis is not good; it's too short.

Many of you have been in moments like this: a health challenge with a loved one or with yourself. One day everything is normal, the next it is not. How do we tap into hope?

I am the baby in my family, 13 years younger than my siblings. We lost my father 15 years ago. And I am not ready to lose my mom. Selfishly, I think of all the *simchas* she won't attend. I read and study all of the research material, and ask the doctor questions I am not ready to hear the answers to. And yet, I know from when my husband was sick 17 years ago a hopeful outlook is the most important thing- and boy is it hard.

There is no reason to attempt a clinical trial if you don't have hope. Hopelessness is feeling that nothing can get even incrementally better. But transfusions make my mother feel better and gives her more time. More time with her dogs, and family make her grateful. The last few months with my family dropping everything and going to Houston have lifted her spirits. Being there, and holding her hand and supporting my siblings is a gift I don't take for granted. I am hopeful that the medical treatments will ease the pain, lengthen life and help with the inevitable transition. I have to hold on to hope.

The Talmud reminds me: The conscious exercise of hope is a gift we are obliged not to forsake.” And I remind you of this today—— not only to help you find hope for our world, but as a reminder that it’s important to have hope for ourselves.

To allow hope to live in our own lives. To allow us to dream of a future for ourselves in which we are able to find and reclaim our joy; dance with our timbrels.

Last year on Yom Kippur I gave a sermon about the Yom Kippur war on its anniversary. And then, days later, Israel was taken by surprise and attacked again. The Yom Kippur war did not end in Israel’s destruction, but in peaceful borders that would last 50 years.

What if out of this new heartbreak we could forge a new peace? A new way forward?

This year I need a spiritual survival pack. I need a timbrel, a sliver of butter, a cell phone that can call future generations, and a lot of patience. I remind myself that I am not in this alone..

Rabbi Gryn’s father was able to have hope while living in barracks. Mothers of hostages have found the courage to call out for hope and healing. And we are here... surrounded by community. A community packed with music lovers rejoicing together in the sound of Dan Nichols. Together, we are finding Jewish music and Jewish joy.

At Hersh Goldberg Polin’s *shiva* the mourners came together to sing “Hatikvah.” Israel’s national anthem, a song meaning: “Our Hope.” The anthem comes from a poem written by a poet besieged by pogroms. Naftali Herz Imber wrote "Our hope is not yet lost- / The age-old hope;/ To return to the land of our ancestors, / To the city in which

David dwelled." Imber wrote these words 70 years before the State of Israel was born.

### Start playing Hatikvah tune....

The author saw a clear future. He did not live to see his dream come to fruition, but his hope inspired countless others. On May 14th, 1948 when Israeli independence was declared, immediately people in Tel Aviv broke out in song. Singing, *Hatikvah*, together.

As we step into the new year, let us carry forward this lesson of hope. May we all embrace hope in our lives and continue to strive for a world filled with promise and possibility. "Jews have kept hope alive and hope has kept the Jewish people alive." This is why Rabbi Yizhak Greenberg says "hope" is the greatest gift the Jewish people gave to the world. It is *our* greatest gift to ourselves.

*Kol Od Balevav Penima*

*Nefesh Yehudi Homiyah*

*U-L'fatei Mizrach Kadima*

*Ayin L'Tzion Tzofiah*

*Od Lo Avda Tikvateinu*

*HaTikvah Bat Sh'not Alpayim*

*L'Hiyot Am Chofshi, B'Artzeinu*

*Eretz Tziyon, ViYerushalayim.*

[1] Full story can be found in *Chasing Shadow* by Hugo Gryn, pages 236-237

[2] Rabbi Sachs, essay, "How the Jewish People Invented Hope."

[3] Naomi Rosenblatt, *Wrestling with Angels*

[4] Brene Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*, page 97

[5] Jesse Olitzky

This sermon was in part inspired by Rabbi Samantha Kahn and Edited by Diana Fenves