

ROSH HASHANAH DRASH 5782 / 2021
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Shana tova. Welcome to 5782.

With everything we've lived through this past year, may we find hope in this new one.

And yes, I mean that. In spite of the destruction we are witnessing, and the crumbling of infrastructures upon which we've depended, in spite of the pandemic and social consequences of it, in spite of the ongoing social pandemics of white supremacy and the often violent consequences of racism, and in spite of other injustices for which we seek *tikkun*, repair and transformation, and in spite of the rapidly accelerating realities of climate chaos, on which I'll be focusing our attention for this evening's dvar, in spite of all this, I want to talk about hope — audacious, sober, challenging, life-affirming hope, and what it means to hold out hope in a time such as this.

And there are reasons to be hopeful. The world we're facing with regards to the human-induced climate crisis will demand that we do things in ways we haven't before, yes, that's true. There are many aspects of this. Key among them is how we grow food. There are billions of people and other animals on the planet requiring sustenance, and a combination of agribusiness practices, logging and greed-fueled extraction have left much land unusable for food production, or the soil in need of revitalization. In the short time I've been in Ithaca, I've learned that there are many people in this community alone who've been planting the seeds for new models of agriculture for many years, and are also doing this with an eye towards what's coming our way in the decades ahead. These efforts include some in this Tikken V'or community. This gives me hope.

But sometimes, as we listen to reports of damage from hurricane Ida, from Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, to New York City and New Jersey, and as we hear of the devastation caused by wildfires in the western states, and as we realize that the pace of climate change may be faster than our collective ability to deal with it, it's easy to feel overwhelmed, even despairing. I, for one, often get teary when I hear news of the forests and homes burning in

my other home state of California. I know those forests, those trees. I know some of the people with houses there. It breaks my heart.

So how can we do this? How can we maintain hope, or at the very least, find it again when we lose track of it? And how can we use our hope to sustainably fuel the transformation of our society to one that not only can face the times ahead, but can do so through a lens of love, justice, compassion, right relationship?

This year of 5782, according to Torah, is a *shmita* year, a year of release for the land. A year of debt forgiveness. A reminder to share resources with those in need. The seven year agricultural cycle of the Torah which culminates with the *shmita* year is first mentioned in the book of Exodus 23: 10-11.

Ex 23:10-11 For six years you will seed your land and gather its produce. And the seventh year תשמטנה *tishmetenah* (you will release it/the land) and נטשתה *netashtah* (let it alone). And those in need will eat from what grows, and you will eat, and what's left will be for the animals of the field. And you will do the same with your vineyards and olive groves.

Now this word *netashtah*, let it alone, comes from a root that could be about abandonment if used in another context, as in leave them to their own devices, and let the consequences be what they may. But here it's about mindful stewardship, and of abandoning no one, leaving no one behind.

Shmita was a way, in the agricultural and economic world of the Torah, to put things back in balance. It was a time not only to release the land from humans' need to produce from it, but to release people in need from hunger and release those in debt from indebtedness. And the Torah is sprinkled with reminders about the *shmita* year and its importance.

Just before the verses that remind people to allow the earth and its crops to renew themselves, the Torah says, “*V'ger lo tilchatz.*” You will not oppress the foreigner. The word *tilchatz*, don't oppress, is from a root that also means to press or squeeze, like one might do with grapes or olives. So when Torah says, just two verses later, that planters were not to plant their vineyards and olive groves in the seventh year, I can't help thinking there's a message here — don't abuse the stranger, don't squeeze them dry for your

own satisfaction like you might with your olives or grapes. And oh, by the way, don't abuse your olive trees and grapevines either.

The book of Deuteronomy Dev 15:7-11 speaks of forgiving debt in the seventh year, and disencumbering indebted workers thrown into financial hardship. (In their time meant to free the indentured servant, and in ours might mean relieving student debt, or underwater mortgages, or skyrocketing credit piled up to the benefit of predatory lenders.) Lend fairly and generously, it says, and give generously of your resources to those in need. And don't think "oh, the *shmitah* is coming and I won't be paid back." Because then those in need will rightfully protest, and you will have erred, you will have missed the mark.

I hope we'll explore many of these themes this year as a community, including some on Yom Kippur. I hope we'll grapple with and look for ways to take action on questions about what the teachings of the *shmita* year mean for us in our world today, both in terms of environmental sustainability, and in terms of reparative justice and redistribution of resources. I hope we'll reckon with how this is true even as the impacts of climate chaos continue to bear down upon us.

But for today, here's my main question. As the parameters and severity of the climate crisis rapidly progress, how can we find and maintain hope while squarely facing this reality? What will we release, and to what will we hold fast?

In her book *Silt*, Aurora Levins Morales points us in an interesting direction. Levins Morales is a Puerto Rican, Boricua, Ashkenazi, writer and poet, and an environmental and social justice warrior extraordinaire. In her collection of essays, she envisions both the underground and the visible waterways of the earth like veins connecting all life, carrying life sustaining nutrients from one place to another, even as they also carry the toxins and refuse we've let loose to course through them. It's a book about leaning into the reality we face, the potentially dire circumstances we've set in motion, and aiming high as we attempt to do *teshuvah*, to set things right, to support life on our planet.

In the essay titled "Will We?", she implores us to stretch the limits of our imaginations, because that's what times such as these demand of us. As she

considers the impacts of sea levels rising and rivers flooding, she asks this question:

“What if we all become apprentice islanders, and learn the things that island people know? What if we learn to be flotsam, to be buoyant?”

She imagines stories we might then tell the generations that follow, or tell each other around a campfire, stories about leaning into the dangers in order to survive, of building floating communities out of the wreckage of drowned cities, of embracing pond scum to make fuel and plastics from things that grow, leaving as she puts it, “the ancient dead to dream in their fossil beds.”

Now, you may be thinking, “That’s just fanciful... What good are such stories?... We can’t really do that! And we can’t fix this either... It’s too late... It’s too scary... the powers that be will never... We’ll never... It’s too, well... impossible!

But Levins Morales challenges our fear, our skepticism, and the hopelessness that can bog down even the most hopeful among us. She asks:

“What if we never drown in despair, but learn to float?”

“... What if here and now as the brute force of taking throws us up against the border wall of impossible, we use these stories like chisels to pry apart the stones?”

And in direct contradiction to the voices of the skeptics, and of the skeptic within any of us, she asks:

“Everybody says what if we don’t win, what if we don’t stop the war in time, what if we can’t save each other’s lives, what if we can’t flip the situation, what if we can’t climb the hill of time and roll down the other side, what if we don’t make it? Drum of my heart, drum of the world, nothing is lost, water returning, swamp fed, red blooded, shehechyanu: the rivers are ancient, but the moment is new, so what if we do? What if we do? What if we do?”

So I ask you, those assembled here today, as we begin the new year, as we consider what it means to reckon with our past, offer healing in the world,

and stretch our imaginations so that we can hold out vision for the future, how will we buoy each other up? How will we teach each other, and teach the next generations, to keep our heads up in high waters? How will the adults among us learn from our children's wisdom as they figure out how to navigate the rising seas and scorched earth with which we have encumbered them? How will we release each other from dysfunctional societal habits of extraction and greed and create something new?

In the face of destruction, our ancestors, Jewish and non-Jewish, have found ways to rise above the social destruction of their times. I wonder what our version of that will be in the years ahead. How, I wonder, pondering Aurora's challenge once again, will we learn to float?

I don't fully know the answer. But I do know this. The Torah we'll read from on Yom Kippur this year poignantly instructs us to Choose Life. "Choose Life," it says, "that you and your children and the generations to follow may live on the land."

So what if we do that? What if we can? What if it's not impossible, but rather, what if, with the right intention, and compassion, and skill, and focus, it's inevitable?

And what if we can? What if we do? What if we do? What if we do?

Shanat shmita tova u'metooka. May this new year be one of needed release, and of connection, and buoyancy, of heightened justice and an acceleration of compassion, a year of goodness. May our hope be abundant, and witnessed in each other's eyes and actions, and may we find sweetness in the fruits of our audacious hopefulness.

L'chaim. To Life.