

Rosh Hashanah 5777 – Second Day**Hope in an Uncertain World**

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett

Temple Beth Abraham, Nashua

Last spring, I got a call from one of our congregants, Sandi McCurdy. She wanted to know if she could chant the Haftarah on July 30, which was about ten weeks away. This was her traditional Haftarah, the one she learned for her Bat Mitzvah.

It wouldn't have been an unusual request -- but Sandi was dying of cancer.

I had seen and talked with Sandi any number of times during her illness. But the last time before this call that I'd spoken to her outside of shul was some weeks before, right after she had gotten discouraging test results. Sandi had already rallied several times. This time, when she called about the Haftarah, I wondered if she was thinking: I will chant the Haftarah, if I am still here on July 30. She didn't say that. And I didn't say anything other than yes, of course, the date is yours.

I hung up the phone with Sandi that day just blown away by her example of hope. Sandi died this summer. She went into hospice a week before her Haftarah, and she died two days before she was supposed to chant. But in her request, and how she lived to the last days, I still see a lesson about hope.

What is hope? What it does it mean to live with hope in an uncertain world?

Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright and president, wrote:

“Hope is not prognostication... [It] is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success... Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

Among the questions that people have asked me more than any other these past few months is how we can live with hope in a world that seems so suddenly uncertain. The randomness of terror, in markets

and nightclubs and community centers, not just in big cities like Paris and Tel Aviv but in smaller places like Orlando, San Bernadino and St. Cloud.

And within our community, so many people are heading into the new year carrying worries and problems that might or might not become better between this Rosh Hashanah and the next. Parents worrying about children who struggle. People living with chronic illnesses, with addictions and recovery, with mental illness. Families still working through conflicts and divorces over several years. Trying to find financially sufficient and rewarding work in the wake still of the recession. All the attempts to get right the balance of work and family, of activities and calm and rest in our households.

Within any of these, what does it mean to live with hope?

Hope, as Havel said, is not the same thing as optimism. It's not a personality quality either – I can think of some particularly cantankerous people who live with great hope. The Talmud says that when we each arrive in Heaven, God will ask us four questions: “Have you set aside time to study Torah? Have you made sure to secure the future after you are gone? Did you engage in business honestly? Did you have hope for redemption?”

Judaism is a religion of hope. In Hebrew, *tikvah* – hope is literally our national anthem. Hope is how Avraham gets up early, the day after God asks him to take his son to the mountaintop. Just to wake up, and to walk into the absurd, with some conviction that the walk and the climb will not have been absurd.

Do you want to know what's the most potent Jewish symbol of hope in an uncertain world? It's this:



A *dreidel*. The dreidel we spin on Chanuka. Think about it: at first glance, the *dreidel* is the very essence of randomness, of uncertainty. It lands on one of four sides, four Hebrew letters -- *Nun*, *Gimel*, *Hay*, *Shin*, if you are playing outside Israel. I want to suggest that each landing, each letter, represents a

different kind of hope.

Where did Chanuka come from? Next week I'll remind you how Yom Ha-Kippurim and Purim are related. Rosh Hashanah and Chanuka are in fact connected in the Jewish calendar. Bookends to the fall. As the days begin to get colder and darker, we declare from Rosh Hashanah through Sukkot that all is in fact beginning. Chanuka comes at the end of this season, and mirrors this month, Sukkot in particular, through eight days of celebration and affirmation of who we are and what we stand for.

We usually talk about Chanuka as the festival of miracles. But it's really about hope. It's about the four letters of the dreidel – *Gimel* hope, *Hay* hope, *Shin* hope, and *Nun* hope.

The dreidel game works like this: Someone brings the M&Ms and stakes the pot. When you spin, if you land on *Gimel* you get everything. *Hay*, you take half. *Shin*, you put something in. *Nun*, nothing happens.

Gimel in the dreidel game is when you get everything. *Gimel* stands for *gadol*, great or large. *Gimel* hope is going for broke, hoping and praying for everything. The final definitive cure from an illness. Life, or the world, exactly as it is supposed to be. And not just praying for it all, but seeing it happen.

When I think about being hopeful in the world on a *Gimel* scale, I think always of a story told by my colleague Rabbi Sharon Brous from Los Angeles. Sharon tells about New York Times columnist Nick Kristof and his wife Sheryl WuDunn, who were living in China and in 1990 met a young girl named Dai Manju from a small, impoverished village. Dai Manju was a terrific student who had to walk four miles to school every day. Her parents couldn't always pay the \$13 annual tuition, and she was certain they couldn't afford the additional \$4 a year it would cost for junior high and she would have to drop out for good.

Kristof wrote a story about Dai Manju. People began to donate money, and one donation came through for \$10,000! Enough to start building another school and pay tuition for many many Dai Manju-s. You'd think that was the *Gimel*, right?

But it wasn't. When he followed up the story, Nick Kristof discovered that when the bank was converting one particular donation from dollars to yuan, a decimal point was lost. The reader had in fact donated only \$100! But instead of getting its money back from the school and ending the project, the bank honored the original transfer as its own donation.

Ten years later, Dai Manju had finished high school and trained to become an accountant. Every home in her village had electricity. And the shack where her whole family used to sleep was now where their pig lived! Dai Manju's siblings and classmates had good jobs and could support their families. By the time Dai Manju was 30, she was an executive in a corporation and thinking of starting her own company, Rabbi Brous reports.

The *Gimel* is all of it – the spirit of this remarkable girl, the dedication of the journalists who cared about the injustice, the generosity of the readers and the bank that did the right thing. If there weren't some *Gimel* in the world, we could never hope at all.

In dreidel, the odds of a *Gimel* are long, just one in four. But each one keeps us going. When the world as it is suddenly crosses with the world that we know is supposed to be – that gives us hope.

When the dreidel lands on *Hay*, you take half the pot. *Hay* hope is hope for something partial. It's remission in cancer; a good day during the months after a concussion. Or one win on a small scale on a big issue.

While we may be frustrated by the national elections, last week I went to a meeting at Nashua City Hall of the Board of Alderman. Up for debate was a proposal to make Nashua an official “welcoming city”, in support of the work that is being done here by a wide coalition to welcome and integrate immigrants and people of different backgrounds.

Just watching the parade of speakers and supporters was an incredible cause for hope, on our small scale. The Democratic mayor and the Republican head of the Chamber of Commerce. The Chief of Police, who talked about work being done with communities of different colors – and a black man who told of nearly being beaten when he tried to register to vote down south in the 1950s. Two refugees,

speaking in their brand-new, broken English. Ministers, social workers, educators, community organizers.

It's not all of America; it's one small city. It only passed the council 8-7 – talk about *Hay* plus just a little. The resolution sets up more work to do. But one of the most interesting reactions I got when I told people about it was from a friend of mine in Israel, who found it incredibly hopeful. Even for her, in a place of profound division and out-and-out violence, our story was definitely a *Hay*.

A third play in dreidel is *Shin* -- you don't win, you put something back. *Shin* in Hebrew stands for sham, which means "there", somewhere else.

It seems like the opposite of hope – but it's not. *Shin* hope is how we leap the distance between what we pray for and what is, when they seem far from each other.

The whole story of Chanuka comes from *Shin*. There is a legend even older than the one about the cruse of oil that lasted miraculously for eight days. It's the story of *kohanim*, Temple priests, who when they saw the Temple about to be destroyed some centuries earlier, took some of the fire from the altar and buried it. They kept a secret code, known only to other priests and hidden from the enemy.

They believed one day that someone would go and find the oil – maybe not in their career or lifetime, but later on. Instead of despairing, they played a *Shin*. They put something in, for later, for someone else.

Shin hope is the congregant who was saying her mother's name for *misheberach* for many weeks, until her mother died. The next time they were back in shul on Shabbat, after returning from shiva out of town, I had a pit in my stomach, thinking about the name we couldn't say. But then, she did something remarkable – she said someone else's name. She offered up a prayer for someone else's healing. Surely that prayer wasn't a Gimel, a hope for a cure. The prayer was a *Shin*, a response to loss by doing for someone else who had a need for prayer and a need for hope.

I see *Shin* hope here in the shul every week, in a group of friends who have suffered so many losses in

the past decade or so – their own spouses, their good friends. They could question and curse God, and they do; they could find it painful to be in this place that they built together, and sometimes they do. But they are here. They sing, they organize, they cook for you, they come up here to help with the service on the bimah. They build dreams in the wider community; they show up at your shiva homes when you have suffered a loss, and they are some of the synagogue's most trusted wise people and advisors.

I've left for last the *Nun*, the dreidel play where nothing happens. Strangely, *Nun* in Hebrew is the first letter of *Nes*, the word for miracle. So why nothing?

Nun is looking where others would have no hope – and to live hopefully anyway.

This week, the Israeli leader Shimon Peres died. He had served as prime minister and president of the State of Israel, among other offices. He has been mourned as the last of the founders of the State. But on the face of it, Prime Minister Peres might seem like the greatest loser in the history of Israeli politics. He was identified more than anyone with the Oslo peace process that was supposed to end the conflict with the Palestinians. Depending on how you count, he lost either four or five national elections.

Yet Shimon Peres, even in his 90s, refused to give up his conviction that one day his visions would come true. Once he had built Israel's first energy revolution, and pioneered its nuclear program. Now, as an elder statesman, he rolled up his sleeves with young innovators and entrepreneurs to help launch the newest phase of Israel's green energy revolution. He looked to inspire leaders, especially young ones, around the world.

Shimon Peres lived by these words of Rabbi Donniel Hartman: “It is not in our hands alone to actualize our dreams. It is in our hands to ensure that these dreams remain alive.”

Hoping with a *Nun* was what Sandi McCurdy did when she volunteered to chant Haftarah knowing she might well not make it.

When Sandi went into hospice, I sat with her and asked her where she found the strength to keep going and to hope. She responded simply that she loved the two shuls she was involved in, and being close to the Torah, and the people who were in her life through those things, and her small family. Sandi's hope wasn't in her recovery, but in the purpose with which she was living, and being part of the purpose that others were living. It was hardly even a question for her.

Nun, Gimel, Hay, Shin. Hope for the biggest things, hope for partial healing and partial justice. Hoping for others, and just hoping when you can't give any good reason for doing so.

And one of the reasons we come here, on these High Holy Days and every Shabbat, is because this is one place where the cruse of oil is stored away for us. Someone has to bring out the M&Ms! And that's what we do here, week in and week out.

People ask me how I can pray in the traditional way. How I can ask God for things that won't happen or praise God for things about the world that aren't true. But I say that we come to pray and to read Torah to gather up hope, to store it up, and to find it when we need it.

Shul is where we come with an absolute guarantee that dozens of people on Shabbat, and hundreds this week and next, will use their lips for sure, to say words of peace, love, generosity, and justice.

Shul is where we come to tell the eternal story of the Torah, which is a story of hope. When the world was violent, Noah's family built an ark and we started again. When Avraham and Sarah were childless, they become parents and founders of a new people. A baby is threatened, hidden away, then rescued and become a great leader. When our ancestors were abandoned in Egypt, degraded and dirty, God not only rescued them but chose them to bear God's Torah and mission into the world.

We come here to pray out our greatest hopes. This is where we tell the *Gimel* stories. They're in the Torah and the prayerbook. In the sermons we bring them too, from history and current times. That's also where we process the *Hays*, *Shins*, and *Nuns* from our world. It's how we load the dreidel, load the dice for our lives and the world.

Hope isn't optimistic, and it isn't the expectation that things will turn out right. Hope in itself doesn't guarantee healing or *Tikkun Olam*. But when we hope together, we make it more possible that we will become the people who can make these things happen.

I know that not everyone can hope in a *Gimel* way right now, or for the year to come. Yet I hope you can find one of paths of hope – a *Hay*, a *Shin*, a *Nun*. And most of all, I hope we all recognize the ways we are the cruse of oil, storehouses of hope, for each other in the community and for the world outside.

I spoke about the dreidel, the symbol of hope around the randomness of life, and the shofar is really the same thing. *Tekiah* is *Gimel* – great and complete hope. *Sh'varim*, the partial notes, are like the *Hay*. *Teruah* is like the *Shin*, pieces of hope that we give to each other and that have to be gathered up from other places. There is silence between the notes, which is *Nun*. If we can each hope in the New Year is one of these different ways, then we can be a community and a people who bring hope into the world – *Tekiah Gedolah*.