

Love Life, Cultivate Hope – Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782

Have you noticed the moon lately?

This is Erev Rosh Hashanah, the first of the month of Tishrei. On the first of the month, in all the months of the Jewish calendar, we have a new moon – a sliver of a moon, nearly hidden from view. My husband and I were talking about it, and he said it seemed strange, wouldn't our new month, especially of our new year, begin with a full moon?

Each of our months in the Jewish calendar begin with the new moon. Rosh Hashana is both a new month and a new year. I think there is a simple beauty in the notion of a new moon marking the start of both the month and the year, as a new moon is full of hope, full of potential as it is not yet full. Two weeks later, it is a full moon, lighting our path as we discover each new day in 5782. The new moon that we have right now is a reminder to cultivate hope. Two weeks from now it will be Sukkot, where the full moon is a harvest moon, so appropriate for celebrating in a sukkah, a booth we build in our yards, a symbol of our journey through the desert, and when we lived in booths in the fields when we harvested our crops and looked up at the stars and were graced by the light of the harvest moon.

We have now completed the month of Elul. There is something lovely about Elul. It is a time when we begin to prepare for these High Holy Days – we recite Psalm 27 daily, and begin to reflect on the past year, and our upcoming year. It is a time when we strive to come closer to the Divine. Indeed, the letters that make up the word Elul is an acronym for *Ani L'dodi v'Dodi Li. Aleph, Lamed, vav, Lamed. Ani L'dodi v'Dodi Li* means I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine, from the Song of Songs, which the Sages have thought to be a love story between the Jewish people and the Divine.

My words, my conversation with the Divine lately, has been fraught with questions, observations and concerns with what is going on in the world: floods, hurricanes, storms, drought, fire, people fleeing their country and all that they have ever known, a pandemic that affects us and our everyday lives, and the strife and mind boggling separation even within families due to differences of opinion. I have found it hard to engage in this Elul love story with the kind of love that is

pure connection and devotion, but rather, mine are words of concern and anguish. But perhaps the truest love is the love that allows just that.

Let me share with you the words of Psalm 27¹ that we recite daily during the month of Elul:

*To the Beloved,
The Infinite Presence is my light and expanse, who should I fear?
The Infinite Presence is the strength of my life, what shall I dread?
When forces come close
Seeming to devour me,
When narrowness threatens,
And opposition attacks,
All that is menacing stumbles and falls.
Even as an army of mistrust besieges me
My heart does not fear.
Even as thoughts and desires rise up against me
I still have trust.
One thing I ask of the Infinite,
One thing I seek,
To dwell in the Presence all the days of my life.
To awaken to the beauty of each moment
as I pass through this world.
The Infinite shelters me as I encounter difficulty and pain.
The Infinite holds me close in deep and hidden places.
And lifts me high upon a rock.
Now I can see through to what is true.
And I will offer my gifts of thanks
And I will sing and make music to the Eternal.
Please, Infinite One, Listen to my voice, hear my call.
Be gracious with me.
Answer me.
You call to my heart, "Seek my presence"
Your presence I seek.
Please don't hide from me.
Please don't let me turn away in anger.
I long to serve.*

¹ Translation by Yael Levy

*You are my help.
Do not let me feel abandoned. Do not let me turn away.
In You I am safe.
For my mother and father have left me
And it is you who gathers me in.
Teach me Your ways. Guide me on the path of integrity.
There is so much to lead me astray.
Don't let me give in to all that torments me,
the lies, the illusions, the menacing threats.
I must have faith that I can see through all of this
I can see the good, the blessings, the ways of life.
Cultivate hope in the Infinite Presence.
Let your heart be strong and filled with courage.
Cultivate hope.*

Is this psalm a prayer? I think so. There are three basic types of prayer, *hodaah*, thanks, *shevach*, praise, and *bakesh*, request. Our sages teach us that when we pray, we come closer to God.

Let's take a moment to reflect on the notion of God. I often hear a person say they don't believe in God. So I invite them to tell me more. They often tell me about the God they don't believe in, a father figure with a long beard, judging and stern. I say, I don't believe in that God either. I invite you to consider for yourself, what is the nature of God, and perhaps when you settle on something, if it's of a physical form, consider that God is incorporeal, and that perhaps as Maimonides suggests, we cannot say what God is, but rather what God is not. But I try anyways, because nothing else makes sense, it's hard to grasp. So, in my own way, I think of God as some source, source of life, of energy, source of all existence. I actually have no idea what that looks like, but what I can consider is that I am grateful for existence. That we exist is a gift. Life is a gift. At the core of it all, for me, my relationship with God is about being grateful for life.

When I pray, sometimes I say words of praise and thanks to God. And sometimes I ask questions, and sometimes I make requests, *bakashot*.

Our tradition instructs us not to ask for things that already are. There's the Talmudic example of how one is not to pray that one's pregnant wife have a baby boy, as the gender of the child is already determined. When one drives home and

sees smoke and sirens coming from one's street, we are not supposed to pray that it not be our home, as that too is already determined, these are examples of wasted, empty prayers.

I have a problem with treating God like an ATM machine. Put the prayer of request in, maybe even accompanied by a pledge to God, and expect God to perform the request. That's an ATM machine relationship. God is not an ATM machine. Consider what we need on a deeper level. Perhaps... Courage to face the moments ahead. Endurance, when your heart and hands are needed. Strength, to get through something. Joy, to bring your light into the room. Compassion and a greater capacity to listen, especially when people say certain things, or have an opinion vastly different from our own, and we can feel that inner door of our minds slamming shut, insisting that "they" have lost their minds, or "they are crazy." Consider also, that what we need to cultivate and pray for is hope, hope, in the face of despair. Psalm 27 shows us the way. Let us revisit the last few lines:

Teach me Your ways. Guide me on the path of integrity.

There is so much to lead me astray.

*Don't let me give in to all that torments me,
the lies, the illusions, the menacing threats.*

*I must have faith that I can see through all of this
I can see the good, the blessings, the ways of life.*

Cultivate hope in the Infinite Presence.

Let your heart be strong and filled with courage.

Cultivate hope.

Rabbi Chana Mishulovin notes that the last verse of psalm 27 begins and ends with cultivating hope. The middle of the verse calls upon us to strengthen our hearts. How? By surrounding our heart with hope, *kaveh*.

קְוֵה אֱלֹהֵי הַיְהוָה חֲזַק וַיַּמֶּץ לִבְּךָ וְקֵוֵה אֱלֹהֵי הַיְהוָה

Kaveh el Adonai hazak v'yametz libeha v'kaveh el Adonai

*Cultivate hope in the Eternal; strengthen your heart with courage,
and have hope in the Eternal.*

The message to us is clear: Surround our heart with hope.

Hope in the face of all that declares otherwise is powerful.

Not the hope that is blind to reality, but the hope that stands in the face of everything. The hope that strengthens us.

How do we find this hope? By being real. Say what's true – I'm concerned, I worry. I am concerned about so many things, climate change, about people in the world, the pandemic, about how our lives have changed. But also, don't drown in the worry. It's okay to acknowledge grief. We are all grieving. My heart grieves for what we have lost – I grieve that we walk around with masks. I miss seeing people's smiles, their faces, see their lips move when they talk. I grieve for those we have lost, those who have died alone, we were unable to sit with them and hold their hand. I keep reminding myself to pack a getaway bag in case we need to evacuate (again) because of a brush fire. I grieve for the seemingly carefree days of yesteryear. I know also that the grief is a measure of a deep love of this world, of life, of the gift of existence.

Underneath our worries and grief reveals a deep love for something that we care about, something that we are grateful for. In this way we discover our deep love for life, even in the midst of worry and grief.

Hope is so very Jewish. The national anthem of Israel is HaTikvah, The Hope. In the face of everything, we Jews hope. Hope strengthens us.

Where do we find hope?

We find hope in that we can all learn and grow. I don't mean learning math, I mean, developing our character, learning to be more compassionate, understanding, patient, listen better. We are not in a fixed state at some point in our lives. We grow as human beings all the days of our lives, and we have more to say about that than we often realize.

In Chapter three of Exodus, Moses meets God at the burning bush, and God says to Moses, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry...I will send you Moses, to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. (Ex 3:7, 10).

Moses responds to God, "but they will not listen to me, nor listen to my voice, further, I am not eloquent, I am slow of speech..." (Ex 4:1,10). On Yom Kippur day, we read from the book of Deuteronomy. This book is 34 chapters long. This is, with the exception of just a few verses, all the words of Moses, recounting the journey of the Israelites and the laws received at Mount Sinai.

If Moses can grow from the reticent man fearful of speaking, fearful of going forth as a leader appointed by God, then growth is possible. Our tradition is saying yes,

yes, we can grow, we can transform ourselves. We can develop our character. It does not happen in an instant, but it does happen with awareness and dedication. Judaism's tradition of Mussar is a practice of character development, enabling us to live our lives consistent with our values. In this way we cultivate hope.

Another source of hope – God does not send Moses off to Egypt to deal with pharaoh alone. While Moses is still reticent to do as God asks, God says, “behold, your brother comes forth to meet you...and you shall speak to him and put words in his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do” (Ex 4:14,15 selected). What is this hope? Moses is not alone. His brother is with him, and God is their teacher. We can find hope in reaching out to others, for support, for learning. We are not alone. When we learn that we do not have to do everything ourselves, we find hope. We empower others, and empowering others brings strength and hope. When someone believes in us, we begin to believe in ourselves. When we encourage and believe in our children, our families, our selves, we get to be bigger. Remember what even Moses said: “Who am I to go to Pharaoh?” He needed someone to believe in him. God believed in him, but God also sent Aaron, Moses' brother, to empower him, to believe in him, to walk with him. When we let God in, we let those in who God has sent to us. We allow ourselves to be empowered, and we are not alone. A word of faith, support, of encouragement, can mean the world.

Another source of hope is one that, like our new moon, is not always visible. We often listen to the worst of what is happening in the world from our news, podcasts, twitter, and so on. The news reports what does happen, not what does not happen. It's easy to focus on the negative. But there's a lot to celebrate, if we choose to see it. We have more collaboration of people addressing the challenges in this world than ever before. Yes, we are experiencing a pandemic, but rather than being completely alone on this Erev Rosh Hashana, we have this amazing way to connect using technology. No, it's not the same. It has advantages and disadvantages, but here we are, connecting rather than being alone. We have a world of connection that is now possible because of innovation and collaboration, in areas of medicine, science, technology, ways to make life easier, cleaner, more efficient. Ways to make our world a better place. But the news rarely reports this because news tends to focus on the negative. We have to train our brains to look at what's good in the world while at the same time not ignoring and doing something about the things that do need our attention.

The first chapter of Genesis has several times where God says ‘and it was good,’ but do we remember this? It is part of human nature to remember the negative, that story about Adam and Eve, the snake, and the apple, remember? But that story is prefaced with the first creation story in which God says multiple times “it was good.” Scientists say that we remember the negative to survive because we had to learn what was going to chase us, bite us, eat us, or poison us. That kind of learning kept us alive. But today, we rarely need to live at that level – we don’t need to run from the lion, but our brains haven’t caught up with modern life – our brains are still giving us fight or flight signals, and the stress takes its toll.

We need a daily dose of hope. Check in with the news, but then turn it off. Be informed and take action when needed, but don’t forget to hug your spouse, your children, the important people in your life. We need more oxytocin and less cortisol. Oxytocin is from hugs, cortisol is from the things that stress us. We need to notice, like God did, the things in nature that are good. Beauty, nature, friends, love, these restore us and give us hope.

We can cultivate hope. How?

First, we can each learn and grow in character. Who we are is not static. We have tools and practices within our Jewish tradition to guide us.

Second, we are not alone. There are people in our lives who believe in us. Allow them to empower us. Let us empower others, say that encouraging word. When others succeed, we all succeed. Love and faith grows and is an unlimited resource.

Finally, the news is not our friend. It is useful, but should not be our constant companion. It frightens us and trains our brains to see the world in a certain way. We can and are changing the world for the better. Yes, there is much to do to heal our world, but constant worry hampers our constructive efforts. Instead, seek joy, loving relationships, nature, friends. Love life, cultivate hope.

As we move from Elul and the relationship of love it represents, to the hope and potential embodied by the new moon, may we be filled with empowerment and strength, and love life and cultivate hope, in our new year of 5782.

Shana Tovah tikateivu, may you be inscribed for a good year,
Rabbi Lisa Bock