

In some capacity or another -

Many of us are intimately familiar with -

the psychological process known –

colloquially as ‘Monday morning quarterbacking.’

That is, the phenomena,

Whereby we are inundated with –

thoughts of the world as it might have been.

I imagine for a quarterback these idealizations –

Revolve around what one might have done –

Had one seen the open receiver –

rather than forcing a pass into double coverage and –
thereby precipitating an interception.

Or if one had only foreseen the blitzing outside linebacker –

And audibled to a running back slip screen –

So as to exploit the overeager defense.

The rabbinic equivalent of Monday morning quarterbacking –

Is probably Elul sermon writing.

If only I had known what the year of 5780 would bring –

How might I have tailored my message?

What could a student rabbi have said to his congregation –

On the precipice of a pandemic?

What prescient profundity could I have proffered –

If only I had known that the world would catch fire;

If only I had known that the flames would scorch –

every corner of the earth –

and that each one of us would be affected so profoundly.

At the beginning of this New Year –

we are fighting many of the same old battles.

The march for racial reckoning

But, in recognition of the precious little –

that is in our individual control,

For better or worse,

much of my messaging remains the same as we enter 5781.

I poured over the words I spoke from this very spot a year ago –

Many of them are evergreen.

Over the course of this year's High Holy Days –

You will again be inundated with –

meditations on forgiveness and morality,

I will recapitulate many of the tried and true thematic pillars –

which uphold the importance of these days.

But, if I could turn back time,

I would have but one addendum –

one message that I would wish to impart as we embarked –

on what would become –

one of the most violently destabilizing years in my lifetime.

I will not neglect to offer it now,

as we stand together on the cusp of this new year:

above all else, we must have hope.

Even on the darkest night,

hope is an illuminating eternal flame.

Without hope we blindly fumble for meaning.

It is our warmth in bitter cold.

Our sukkah against of the freezing winds of change.

Like the sukkah,

hope is but a temporary refuge.

Hope is the first step we take into the New Year –

but, if this year is anything like the last,

it is only the first step in a 1,000 miles journey.

From hope we must move to faith -

and from faith to intentionality.

We must hope because it has always been

Tonight, we begin the year with hope –

because it is our eternal spring.

The 18th century poet, Alexander Pope,

whom I quoted to you last year in another context,

(to err is human, to forgive is divine)

wrote thusly:

““Hope springs eternal in the human breast;

Man never Is, but always To be blest.

The soul, uneasy, and confin'd from home,

Rests and expatiates in a life to come.”

Those of you well versed in –
18th century Western European literary classics –
might recall Voltaire's critique of such optimism –
enshrined in his famous novella: *Candide, Ou L'Optimisme*.
It's true, that we should all be wary of Panglossian claims like,
“This is the best of all possible worlds,”
and, “this is the greatest possible American,”
because we all hope it could be better.
Voltaire's skepticism of optimistic philosophy was –
in large part born out of his lived experience.

Two historical calamities are said to have precipitated *Candide*,
and are referenced with great frequency therein:

The Seven Years' War; and -

the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake, Tsunami, and resulting fires.

Is it any surprise that it might be difficult for some of us –
to find hope in the midst of a climate crises:

as fires rage on in the West –

pollute the air, and blot out the sun;

when we are only one named storm away from –

having to use the Greek alphabet to track which weather event
caused what degree of human suffering;

When almost 1 million people around the world –

200,000 of them Americans –

have died from COVID-19 –

it is all too easy to lose hope –

or to get lost in the absurdity of it all.

It isn't clear which Pandemic inspired –

Albert Camus to write *The Plague*, but

it his sentiments seem contemporary when he writes:

“I have no idea what's awaiting me,
or what will happen when this all ends.”

The liturgy of the High Holidays has always placed –
this existential angst in our mouths with –
the recitation of Unetaneh Tokef.

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
and on Yom Kippur it is sealed –
how many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
who shall live and who shall die,
who in good time, and who by an untimely death,

who by water and who by fire,
who by sword and who by wild beast,
who by famine and who by thirst,
who by earthquake and who by plague,
who by strangulation and who by lapidation,
who shall have rest and who wander,
who shall be at peace and who pursued,
who shall be serene and who tormented,
who shall become impoverished and who wealthy,
who shall be debased, and who exalted.

We hope that we, and those we love will be –
among the lucky ones

But we also have faith,

Faith that repentance, prayer and righteousness –
avert the severity of the decree.

So again I say to you:

Hope is the first step;

Faith the second.

We hope that we can turn back before it's too late,
we must have faith in the efficacy process of T'shuvah.

We hope that our merits are greater than our faults,
we must have faith that it is enough to be human.

Step one of the journey is to hope,
the next step must be taken in faith.

Hope is essentially our ability to dream,
faith is our belief that our dreams can still come true.

But, even though we need hope and faith,
alone they are not enough.

If we really want to realize a better world,
if we really want to realize a better self,

we need intentionality.

Every thought we think,

every word we speak,

every action we undertake,

must be intentionally crafted and implemented.

This is why,

before we set out to heal the world,

we must heal ourselves.

The Hasidic Master, Rabbi Yitzhak of Vorki –

once hosted several prominent men of Israel.

They discussed the value of an honest servant for –
the stewardship of a house.

When a servant is good, they said, everything turns out well,
as illustrated by the biblical Joseph,
under whose oversight everything in Potifer's house flourished.
But Rabbi Yitzhak differed.

He said:

“Once, I thought so too, but my teacher –
Rabbi David of Levov, pointed out to me –
that everything depended not on the servant –

but on the master of the house.

In my youth I had many difficulties with my wife.

Although I was willing to suffer them,

I pitied the servants.

Therefore, I visited my teacher and asked him,

‘should I stand up to my wife?’

He answered:

“Why talk to me? Talk to yourself!”

I only understood his advice when I remembered –

the saying of the Ba'al Shem Tov:

“There is the thought, the speech, and the act.

The thought corresponds to the wife,

the speech to the children,

and the act to the servants.

For the person who understands and –

deals with all three correct,

everything will turn out well.”

The lesson intended by my teacher is thus:

Everything depends on my own self.

Everything depends on us.

This is why we are so methodical in our accounting –
over the course of the high holidays –
especially tonight as we begin a New Year –
we must recognize that the conflicts –
which emerge between us and the world as it is –
are fundamentally conflicts within our own souls.

Only by overcoming these internal conflicts –
can we bring about in end to external ones.

Every one of us,
autonomous individuals all,

must transform ourselves in order to transform the world.

Our personal transformations are Archimedean fulcrums –

by which each one of us has the power to move the world.

But it takes will and direction.

One must find one's way through –

the mundanity of everyday life in order to reach the self.

One must find the inner, deeper, self –

our hopes are, in a sense, the truest reflection thereof –

that is why we must begin there.

Hope is the thought.

Our faith in the transformative power of hope is speech –
giving voice to hope develops the lexicon of possibility.

Finally, intentionality is the act,
only through intentionality can we transform ourselves.

Only by intentional self-actualization –
can we transform the world.

Tonight,
even if we cannot be physically close,
we are still close to one another.

My soul reaches out to yours –

to fill the space where our hands would touch.

May these distanced days –

provide each of us with the space –

to see ourselves clearly –

with the space to heal –

with the space to hope –

space filled with vocalized faith

intentional space wherein we take our first steps –

towards a sweet new year.

May we all be inscribed for good.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.