

Holding onto Hope

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5781

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“The odds against him looked insurmountable,” writes historian David McCullough of President Harry Truman’s reelection chances in the summer of 1948. Polls “showed Dewey leading by an ‘unbeatable’ 44 to 31 percent.” Later, in the fall, “*Newsweek*...[took] a poll of fifty highly-regarded political writers, to ask which candidate they thought would win the election...The vote was unanimous, 50 for Dewey, 0 for Truman.”ⁱ

President Harry Truman, though, was undaunted. He embarked on his now-famous “Whistle-stop Campaign,” traveling “all told [almost 22,000 miles, via train,] as far nearly as around the world.”ⁱⁱ

As his biographer explains: “No President in history had ever gone so far in quest of support from the people, or with less cause for the effort, to judge from informed opinion...More than any other event in his public life, ... it would reveal the kind of man he was.”ⁱⁱⁱ The effort, though, was dismissed as hopeless.

In the end, Truman won by a landslide,^{iv} but that’s hardly the point. Tested in the most challenging of circumstances, Harry Truman **held onto hope**. With trusted partners—his family, his closest advisors and friends, and with his God—Harry Truman persisted, and he prevailed.

Like Harry Truman, Americans today face a grave trial, with the odds stacked against us.

We live in the midst of a global pandemic that has killed hundreds of thousands in this country and around the world, with no end in sight. Life today bears little resemblance to the lives we knew last Rosh Hashanah. Very few of us work, go to school, worship, celebrate or grieve as we did a year ago. We exercise differently. We rarely eat in restaurants, if ever. We travel less if at all. Those inconveniences pale in comparison to hardships faced by Americans who have fallen ill, grieved loved ones taken by the virus, or have lost their jobs and livelihoods.

If that weren’t enough, the summer just ended offered a painful reminder that racial injustice continues as a deadly American plague. Add civil unrest, violent response to it, and an angrily divided nation approaching a presidential election, and we could be forgiven for despair, just as President Truman might not have been blamed for throwing in the towel in the summer of 1948.

Our Jewish tradition begs us not to give up hope. Jewish history includes too many eras when our people endured persecution, pogroms, expulsion, and genocide, just because they were Jewish. Yet they resisted the temptation to abandon their faith. Instead, they clung to the hope for better times ahead, as we are here to prove.

Our Rosh Hashanah Torah reading and Shofar service demand that we remain hopeful.

Our portion this morning, the Binding of Isaac, portrays Abraham and his son, Isaac, in a horrific predicament. Only upon further examination do we see that it is also a story about holding on to hope in the direst of circumstances.

Father and son set out for a terrible mission, known only to Abraham, whom God commands to sacrifice his son. Along the way, Isaac, not knowing the purpose of the mission, wonders, “where is the sheep”^v to be sacrificed? Abraham answers: “God will provide the sheep for a burnt-offering, my son.”^{vi} How could Abraham know that an angel would stay his hand? That a ram would be provided, “in the thicket...caught by its horns?”^{vii} Abraham, faced with an unspeakably cruel commandment, **holds onto the hope** that God will not require him to slaughter his son.^{viii}

Rabbi Dani Segal observes that the passage is meant to teach a profound lesson: If we look carefully, we will find that God provides us the wherewithal and the means to survive, and even thrive, through the most trying of times.^{ix} Like Abraham, facing calamity, we may not always recognize the resources available to us and how they may help. The source of our salvation may be hidden, like the ram, in a thicket.

In 2020, many of us found blessings we did not know existed before the pandemic. While we missed gathering around our Seder tables, for example, many among us found ourselves sharing Seder on Zoom with family and friends who live far away and would not have gathered in person. In 5781, might we uncover patience we did not know we possessed, to endure for a year what seemed impossible even for a week? Might we nurture a newfound talent, read a book for which we wouldn’t otherwise have found the time, or deepen a relationship at a distance, finding reason for hope where we did not expect?

The last section of our Shofar service today is known as *shofarot*, the Hebrew plural of the word “shofar,” referring specifically to two shofars. The first recalls a time when the shofar sounded in the past, when our Torah was given at Mt. Sinai. The second points to a time when we pray the shofar will be heard in the future, at the coming of the messianic era of perfect peace and an end to suffering.

Our Jewish people has lived through times more perilous than our own. Each time, our ancestors heard *t'kiah g'dolah*, the shofar's longest, climactic blast, as "a mighty call that never stops," in the words of our prayer book, calling upon us "to believe in a time when all life will be cherished; to work for that day, and to know it will come."^x

Rabbi David Wolpe tells the story of Rabbi Hugo Gryn, once "a child in Auschwitz... Hanukkah came, and after fashioning a makeshift menorah, his father melted the precious margarine ration to light a wick for the first night. The young Hugo, outraged, protested to his father. How could he use the food which sustained them in the midst of such horror, just to observe the holiday?" Then, Rabbi Gryn's father "spoke words [his son] never forgot. [He] said: 'My child, we know you can live three days without water. You can live three weeks without food. But you cannot lie for three minutes without hope.'"^{xi}

When Harry Truman stepped onto his train, traveling a distance that would encircle the globe, **he held onto hope**, even in the face of seemingly certain defeat.

When Abraham affirmed that God would provide the sacrificial animal, **he held onto hope**, though he could not know the source that might save him from a fate worse than death.

When Rabbi Hugo Gryn's father kindled the Chanukah lights even in Auschwitz, **he held onto hope** that the life and faith of our people might live.

When the shofar sounds, let us hear its promise of a better future. Like so many before us, we have endured catastrophe in 5780, and it is not over yet. Even at this bleak time, we may be bolstered by the psalmist's promise: "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy."^{xii} Then, even during our own dark days, **we may hold onto hope**.

Amen.

ⁱ Ibid., p. 694.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 654.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 655.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 710.

^v Genesis 22:8.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Genesis 22:13.

^{viii} Admittedly, Rashi and most commentators offer a midrashic reading of this interaction, namely that Abraham is saying that "my son" will be the sheep. Radak offers the more hopeful interpretation as at least one way to understand Genesis 22:8.

^{ix} Rabbi Dani Segal, "Reinventing Ourselves: New Paths for Connection and Communication through Tanakh, Tald, Midrash, and Hasidut," *HartmanSummer@Home*, Shalom Hartman Institute, July 15, 2020.

^x *Mishkan HaNefesh Machzor for the Days of Awe*, New York: CCAR Press, 2015, Rosh Hashanah, p. 281. *Mishkan HaNefesh*'s editors, in a note on the same page, indicate that "a mighty call that never stops" is "based on Deuteronomy 5:19, describing the giving of Torah on Mount Sinai (*kol hadol v'lo yasuf*).

^{xi} Rabbi David Wolpe, "This Is the True Lesson of Hanukkah," *Time*, December 6, 2015.

^{xii} Psalms 126:5.