

Dreaming of a Better Future

Yom Kippur Morning 5783

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On Rosh Hashanah Eve, I explored how we might celebrate the birthday of a traumatized world. This morning, I would like to invite us to dream together, to dream of a better future. But first, a word about how we regard the past and present.

My all-time favorite *Saturday Night Live* sketch was set on Election Night in 2016 and aired four days later. A group of white liberals begin their evening convinced that Hillary Clinton will be elected. Their Black friends aren't so sure. Do these big-city white folks even understand America? They do not. When the election is called, Beck Bennett, portraying a white liberal, exclaims, "This is the most shameful thing America has ever done!" Dave Chapelle and Chris Rock laugh uproariously.ⁱ And, scene. The Black men understand what the white New York liberals do not.

Irony and a lesson are both intended in those roles being played by Chapelle and Rock, who are both wealthy and successful. Black Americans—even when protesting persistent and resurging white supremacy—are mindful of the horrors of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow in our nation's history. Aidy Bryant, portraying another white liberal coming to terms with the election results, exclaims, "Oh my God. I think America's racist!" Chapelle responds, "Oh my God," dripping with sarcasm, "I think I remember my great-grandfather told something like that, but he was like a slave or something."

Oh yes, that.

Last month, Fareed Zakaria wrote, "Psychologists tell us that human beings are hard-wired with a 'negativity bias'—meaning that we're overly sensitive to bad news."ⁱⁱ We tend to imagine, like those white liberals on *SNL*, that the problems we face are unequaled in human history.

That's not the case, of course. Still, so much in the last few years has shaken us. We can easily imagine a better world: A world without dangerous antisemitism. A planet not constantly assaulted by disasters exacerbated by climate change. A globe without a pandemic. An America where democracy and equality are valued, not threatened. A state that does not sanction bigotry but that honestly faces its history and present of white supremacy.

Our Jewish history is, of course, rife with persecution, destruction, exile, and even genocide. Like the characters played by Dave Chapelle and Chris Rock, we know that we are not living in history's worst era. More importantly, Judaism and

Jewish history teach us to have hope—to believe, even to know, that a better future is in the offing. Why would we have Yom Kippur, after all, if we did not believe that commitments we make today could build a better future?

Two thousand years ago, the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. At the time, no greater catastrophe had ever befallen the Jewish people. The Temple was their religious center. Atonement for their sins had been achieved by offering sacrifices there.

Rabbi Yehoshua despaired. “The place where Israel’s sins are forgiven” with burnt offerings laid in ruins. He feared that God’s forgiveness would now be beyond reach. His colleague, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, assuaged his fears: “My son, do not be distressed, for we have a form of atonement just like it...Acts of kindness” would take the place of sacrifices to win God’s mercy.ⁱⁱⁱ

My teacher Yehuda Kurtzer emphasizes, though, that Rabbi Yochanan did not know that his new formula for serving God would survive. Hundreds of years would pass before rabbinic Judaism—with its emphasis on prayer and action, study and observance of Torah—would become entrenched as mainstream Judaism. In his own lifetime, Yochanan could not be assured that people would continue to worship the God of Israel, let alone in keeping with his design.^{iv}

Dr. Kurtzer was speaking to a group of American rabbis—many, like me, devastated in the weeks following the Supreme Court’s Decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*. He reminded us that the opponents of abortion rights had a vision, albeit one not shared by most in that room. They pursued their goal unswervingly for a half century. Many of those who fought those battles died before seeing their dream realized; but it was achieved with a willingness to work toward a goal that might not be reached in their own days.

Three years ago, I told you about Sandra Bland, a woman I met in Selma, Alabama. As a young girl in the 1950s, her grandmother had dragged her to meetings, where a bunch of “old people” were talking about fighting for their freedom. Sandra thought they were fools. “Didn’t they know,” she asked, “that Abraham Lincoln freed us” nearly a century earlier? Her grandmother took her downtown, parading her past stores and government offices she could not enter, at least not through the front door. By the time I met her, more than a half-century after she crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge with Dr. King, Ms. Bland had the wisdom to know that President Lincoln had brought a measure of freedom; and the Civil Rights Movement, another. Still, she understood that the liberation she sought is yet to be fully achieved. She fights for that freedom to this day.

And so must we. The dream is laid out in the opening lines of our nation's Declaration of Independence: "All men [sic] are created equal," the Founders' way of saying that we are all created in God's image. We could easily charge that the Declaration's signatories didn't mean their words. Many of them enslaved other human beings, after all. And yet, those same men wrote that slavery was evil. They believed in their dreams, but they acted on only a fraction of them. America continues to dream, and even to pursue, but never yet fully to achieve, that vision.

Judaism teaches us to plant seeds, even though we may never see them grow. Eileen Hamilton related a Talmudic story to make that point at our community's annual "Love Thy Neighbor" gathering last month: "One day, Honi the Circle Drawer was walking along the road, when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi challenged him, 'How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?' The man replied, 'Seventy years.' Honi ridiculed him: 'Do you really think that you will live another seventy years? Do you honestly expect to eat of this tree's fruit?' The planter replied: 'I was born into a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.'" As the legend continues, Honi fell asleep for seventy years. "When he awoke, he saw a man gathering carobs from that tree. Honi asked, 'Are you the man who planted this tree?' The man replied: 'I am his grandson.'" Judaism enjoins us to dream, and to pursue our vision of a better future, even if achieving it is not in sight.

Kurtzer insists that, if we want a better future, we must be prepared to articulate our vision in clear, stark terms, charting a direction. And we must be both patient and persistent—and, I would add, hopeful and optimistic—in seeking to achieve it, at least in the long term.

Successions of generations of Americans have worked to achieve the dream of equality, albeit incrementally. Now, it's our turn. Join me in planting seeds here at Congregation B'nai Israel and everywhere we go, seeds of embracing every person in our midst:

- People who have been Jewish all their lives, those who have chosen Judaism recently, those who are exploring, and others who find a spiritual home here without formally committing to Judaism.
- People who "look Jewish" and have so-called Distinctive Jewish Names, and those whose external appearance signals some other ethnicity.
- People of every gender and of every sexual orientation.
- Beloved members of our community who live in every family configuration, whether the household consists of one adult, a couple, with or without children, or a home with more than two adults living under the same roof in families that previous generations did not contemplate.

- And yes, people of every political philosophy and identification.

My dream is that, if we can achieve radical acceptance and equality here at Congregation B'nai Israel, we can begin to alleviate the trauma and loneliness of our own days.

A psalm magnificently evokes the joy of imagining a dream, no matter how deferred its realization may be: “When Adonai restores [our] fortunes, we shall see it [as] in a dream. Our mouths shall be filled with laughter; our tongues, with songs of joy...Adonai will do great things for us, and we shall rejoice... Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.”

May that be God’s will. May that be our will. Amen.

ⁱ [Election Night - SNL - YouTube](#), November 12, 2016.

ⁱⁱ [Zakaria: In Tough Times, Don't Lose Sight of Germany's Unlikely Success Story - GV Wire - Explore. Explain. Expose](#), September 1, 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 4.5.

^{iv} Yehuda Kurtzer, Ph.D., “The Zionist Idea,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 10, 2022.

^v Babylonian Talmud, *Ta’anit* 23a.