

The Power of Hope

Source Sheet

What can we learn from Jewish tradition about the value and actions of hope?
How did our hope and images of a better future for the hostages facilitate a new reality?

I. Hope is Mandatory

Rachel Goldberg is the mother of hostage Hersh Goldberg Polin, who was taken captive on October 7th, 2023 and was brutally murdered in captivity in August 2024.

1. Rachel said in **April 2024** right before the holiday of Passover:

"With tears running down my face, I ask and write another question right now...How. Can. This. Be?"

When thinking back to last Passover, to our last Seder, it is unfathomable to imagine that we would be where we are now; as a family, as a nation, or as a people. But...

Hope is Mandatory. That is what it is to be part of the Jewish nation. We are a people who will never give up. We will keep going until we are free, all of us, in body and soul.

May we merit to immediately be sitting again with all our loved ones, free and healing...and singing Dayenu, together. It surely is enough. Enough.

May the Passover aspiration of **לשנה הבאה בני חורין** -next year may we be free people, be truer than ever for all of our loved ones. Every single one. Amen!"

2. Rachel then **shares** in October, 2025:

"Given how much I gulp down doses of hope each day, more than the vitamin D I should be more diligent about, this particular quote of the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks at this challenging moment in our history resonates deeply with me: "It is not too much to say that Jews kept hope alive, and hope kept the Jewish people alive." So as Jon and I have said since the beginning of our painful odyssey, hope is not a suggestion; nor is it advice, no. **Hope is mandatory.**"

II. Optimism and Hope Are Not the Same

1. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 166

"Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope. The Hebrew Bible is not an optimistic book. It is, however, one of the great literatures of hope."

2. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Optimism is All Very Well, but it Takes Courage to Hope*, published in *The Times*, 30th April 2010:

What has happened is a failure to understand the difference between optimism and hope. They sound similar but they are quite different. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, if we work hard enough, we can make things better. Between them lies all the difference in the world.

Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It needs no courage, only a certain naiveté, to be an optimist. It needs a great deal of courage to have hope. The prophets of Israel were not optimists. When everyone else felt secure, they saw the coming catastrophe. But every one of them was an agent of hope...

Jews were a people of hope. By discovering the God who created the universe in love, they became the first practitioners of hope. No Jew who knows his or her history can be an optimist. We have seen too many great civilisations – ancient Egypt, the Roman Empire, medieval Spain and pre-War Germany – lapse into barbarism and murderous hate. You don't need to be an optimist to have hope.

Religious faith is not "positive thinking." It is not naïve optimism. It is not a matter of seeing the world as we would like it to be, and then believing that mere wishing or praying will make it so. God never promised that the world would get better of its own accord.

Faith means seeing the world exactly as it is and yet not giving up the belief that it could be otherwise, if we are ready to act with others to make it so. Faith is realism that has been touched by hope. And hope has the power to transform the world.

III. Experiencing the Non-Real

Transcription of Rav Soloveitchik's speech delivered to the Chevrah Shas in Boston on May 20, 1973 from the book *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer and Shavu'ot*:

...In grammar we operate with three tenses: past, present and future. However, experientially the present can never be isolated and perceived as such. The point of time we call "present" lies either in the past or in the future...What is "past?" It's retrospection, recollection. And what is "future?" Future is anticipation, expectation. What we call "present" is nothing but the vantage position for which we look either forward or backward... Judaism requires the Jew that he experience time in its two dimensions simultaneously... The halachic approach to time is the experiential memory that reaches out for the future... The Jew not only knows history; he lives history. History to the Jew is not just knowledge of the past; it is reexperiencing, reliving the events that occurred a long time ago... Many mitzvot pursue just one goal; to sustain our awareness of the past, and to protect our feeling of closeness to events that transpired long ago...

On the one hand, Judaism requires us to re-experience the past. On the other hand, Judaism requires us to pre-experience the future, the as yet non-real that will become real at some point in time... To exist as a Jew means to be at the juncture of past and future, at the non-real any longer and the non-real as yet... Our mission is to engage in retrospection and anticipation, in recollection and expectation.

IV. Hope as a Verb and an Action

1. Israeli author David Grossman writes:

"[Hope] contains a verb that propels it into the future. Always to the future. Always with forward motion... When we dare to hope, we are proving that there is still one place in our soul where we are free."

2. American writer and activist Rebecca Solnit: *Hope in the Dark: The Untold History of People Power*:

"Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky... hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency... Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How do the various authors describe hope?
- How do they see the connection between hope and action?
- Where might you find connections between hope and freedom?