

At each and every moment of any given day, we can have the opportunity to experience an event that changes the way we view the world. For some, those moments are small and involve one person or thing but for others they are events that impact our larger society in some life altering way.

One such moment was September 11, 2001 - the lives which were ended all too soon will be remembered in just a few days - Rosh Hashanah was only a few days later, starting September 17, 2001 and every rabbi who had written their sermons early found themselves rewriting in those horrible days as emergency responders and volunteers spent long hours searching for survivors and putting out fires. I speak of this difficult time in our country's history, a moment that became for my generation a turning point in our understanding of who we are as Americans, because for many it was a point at which they recognized that hope is required to continue moving forward in life.

One of many stories from that fateful day is the following as told by Usman Farman, a young man from Pakistan who fell down as he was fleeing the smoke from the collapsing Towers:

“A Hasidic Jewish man stopped, looked at his pendant's Arabic inscriptions, and then, “with a deep Brooklyn accent he said, ‘Brother if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us. Grab my hand, let's get the hell out of here.’ He was the last person I would ever thought to help me. If it weren't for him I probably would have been engulfed in shattered glass and debris.”¹

There are countless stories of the individuals who reached out to others in a time of crises and fear to help one another. Hope is what I feel when hearing the stories of those who helped on 9/11 and those who have helped, and continue to help, during every disaster and during every day of seemingly regular life.

Hope is a four-letter word for many people because all too often a person filled with hope is said to be seeing through rose colored glasses. How can a world with poverty, abuse, war, illness, and so much more be a world where one can find hope? I was inspired, and filled with hope, after reading a new collection of essays by a number of well-known young adult authors on the topic titled “HopeNation” - my first purchase at This is a Bookstore. The themes of overcoming racism, tragedy, including September 11th, growing up as immigrants to this country, and recognizing the limitations of parents, teachers and others who one interacts with regularly all ended with surprise about what having hope can mean.

¹ Solnit *Hope in the Dark* chapter 22 (2016 edition), 119.

The history of the Jewish people is filled with episodes of hope, even in our darkest days. The Torah is full of stories of our barren foremothers who wish, pray and hope to be granted a child. We will read of Isaac, the son of Sarah who was barren the majority of her life, and we will read of Samuel who's mother Hannah is viewed by the rabbis of old as the model of proper prayer. Hannah's prayers to God for a child were held up by the hope she had of being heard. There is the hope our ancestors had in returning to their homeland in Israel, there is the hope of Israelis today to have peace between themselves and their neighbors as well as with the Palestinians. There is the hope that so many had to hold onto during the darkest days of the Inquisition and the Holocaust.

The place is Vienna, Austria, in the period leading up to World War Two. The people are three Jewish psychiatrists, two learned masters in the field, one the young apprentice.

The first master - Sigmund Freud. Having spent years studying people, he has reached the conclusion that the most basic drive in human beings is the desire for pleasure.

The second master is Alfred Adler. He too has spent years studying human behaviour. His studies have led him to disagree with Sigmund Freud. Adler is convinced that the most basic drive in human beings is the pursuit of power, for control.

The third man is Victor Frankl - a young up-and-coming psychiatrist. But before his career gains any momentum the War starts. Though Freud and Adler manage to escape Europe, Frankl is arrested and spends four years in a concentration camp.

After the War is over Frankl is released from the concentration camp and resumes his career. He reflects upon his time as a prisoner. He noticed something quite strange – the people who survived were not always the ones you'd expect. Many who were physically strong wasted away and died while others who were much more weak physically grew strong and survived. Why? What was it that enabled them to hang on through a living hell?

Frankl spent much time reflecting on the teachings of Freud and Adler but neither pleasure nor power worked to explain who had survived the camps and who had not. So Frankl came up with his own theory. He taught that the difference between those who survived and those who perished was hope. Those who survived never gave up their belief that their lives had meaning, that despite everything going on around them it would one day end and they would live meaningful, purposeful lives. What is the basic human drive? The one thing that gives life value? The ability to live with a sense of meaning. Not pleasure. Not power. Meaning.²

² Source: Based on a talk given by Australian speaker Michael Frost
<https://storiesforpreaching.com/three-psychiatrists/>

Hope and meaning are the basic human drives according to Frankl. He is not alone to have come to this remarkable conclusion. Simon Wiesenthal's book "The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness" shows the depth of ability to forgive the unforgivable in order to continue believing in the good in the world. One finds optimism through hope.

In an article written in April of 2008, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, then the Chief Rabbi of the UK wrote that:

Western civilization is the product of two cultures: ancient Greece and ancient Israel. The Greeks believed in fate: the future is determined by the past. Jews believed in freedom: there is no 'evil decree' that cannot be averted. The Greeks gave the world the concept of tragedy. Jews gave it the idea of hope.³

Jews gave the world the idea of hope. The idea that everything is not as bad as it may seem, that the sun will rise again on a new day. Sacks continued:

To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Every ritual, every mitzvah, every syllable of the Jewish story, every element of Jewish law, is a protest against escapism, resignation or the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism is a sustained struggle, the greatest ever known, against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet. There is no more challenging vocation. Throughout history, when human beings have sought hope they have found it in the Jewish story. Judaism is the religion, and Israel the home, of hope.⁴

Hope is not always discovered in the most horrible of circumstances. Sometimes hope is born in the heart of someone who has believed up until that point that things are fine and will remain fine but will never be incredible. I am one of those people who believes themselves to be an optimist even when I find myself looking around and finding little to be optimistic about. It is in those moments that I have found hope blossoming in my heart and soul. I find hope when I hear from an old friend that they have found acceptance from their parents after years of trying. I find hope when I see one child befriend another without a second thought about race, religion, gender, economics... I find hope when I see the outpouring of support the city of Houston received after Hurricane Harvey. Hope is also found in the cracks in the sidewalk where a flower has poked through and in the unconditional love animals have for their caretakers.

³ <http://rabbisacks.org/future-tense-how-the-jews-invented-hope-published-in-the-jewish-chronicle/>

⁴ *ibid.*

Hope is also one of the middot, one of the character traits, that the Jewish practice of Mussar helps one cultivate. The word *Mussar* is often translated as "discipline", a method of thinking and acting in order to overcome natural tendencies. One Mussar teacher, Rabbi Elya Lopian described Mussar as “teaching the heart what the mind already understands.”

According to Greg Marcus, a practitioner and teacher of Mussar,

“The word Mussar appears in the Bible 51 times, more than half of them in the book of Proverbs. It carried a connotation of ethical instruction according to the teachings of the Torah. In the rabbinic period, texts such as Pirkei Avot [Ethics of the Fathers] carried the thread of personal ethical teachings....In the medieval period, Mussar became a branch of study focused on virtue ethics (as opposed to rules-based ethics), the practice of working to refine one’s character to become a better person and closer to God....For centuries, Mussar was a field of study and an individual practice. Mussar literature continued to grow as scholars from many different Jewish communities wrote practical advice on how to be a better person. However, Mussar books were considered a minor part of the Jewish literature, until the 19th century, when Rabbi Israel Salanter created the Mussar movement.”

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This movement has found new life, especially with the founding of the Mussar Institute by Alan Morinis who has also published a number of books on the practice of Mussar. For some the practice reminds them of Buddhist or other practices, as mediation and self-reflection are important pieces. Just as Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, has multiple branches, so does Mussar. I have found that an understanding of Mussar has given me the vocabulary to express my desire to become more compassionate, understanding, and thoughtful when challenged on my deeply held beliefs. Mussar is a recognition that we all have character traits that we prioritize and therefore excel at practicing and those that we have not cultivated and therefore need attention.

The practice of inviting Hope into our lives, is just that, a practice. An action that takes repeating and cultivation in order to have it’s presence in our lives. Here are the words of a new version of the Israeli National Anthem, Hatikvah, the Hope, which Neshama Carlebach released in 2012:

As long as the heart within

An Israeli soul still yearns

⁵ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-musar-movement/>

And onward, towards the East

An eye still gazes towards our country

We have still not lost our hope

our ancient hope

To be a free people in the land of our fathers

in the city in which David, in which David encamped

To be a free people in our land

In the land of Zion and Jerusalem⁶

I challenge you during these ten days of Awe, where we are challenged to thank and to repent, to find your example of hope. What reminds you on the best and worst of days that there is more out there than the twenty-four hour news cycle would have us believe?

⁶ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/neshama-carlebach-rewrites-hatikva/>