

Sermon For Rosh HaShanah Evening
September 25, 2022 – 1 Tishri, 5783
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
Rabbi Daniel Levin

Ross Douthat and his wife Abby seemed to have it all. Abby worked as a writer for the *Baltimore Sun* and *Smithsonian Magazine*, while in 2009, Ross became the youngest regular op-ed writer for *The New York Times*. The two lived in a beautiful row-house on Capitol Hill in Washington, with their two children and busy fulfilling careers.

Ross grew up in Connecticut and had nurtured a fantasy of raising his family in rural America, in a big old house with lots of land where his kids could run around and play. In 2016, they made the big leap and bought a late 18th century colonial in rural Connecticut, with a barn, a guesthouse, empty chicken coops, and lots of overgrown land near a forest.

One morning, a few days after strolling the property for the inspection, Ross woke up with a stiff neck and a red swelling six inches down from his left ear.

He went to the local walk-in clinic and showed the bump to the doctor. “It’s just a boil,” he said. “Nothing to worry about.”

What followed was a descent into a nightmare. Ross’ body went haywire. The pain migrated everywhere – a gagging sensation in his throat, pain in his chest that felt like a heart-attack, diarrhea, stabbing sensations in his spine, muscle twitching in his chest, prickling and tingling in his extremities.¹ Repeated trips to the Emergency Room brought back normal bloodwork, suggestions to reduce stress, and no answers.

Months later, after batteries of tests and many doctors, the diagnosis finally came: Lyme Disease. While some people can treat Lyme disease with a course of antibiotics, Ross, like many, endured chronic excruciating pain and suffering. Over the months, he lost 40 pounds, bouncing from doctor to doctor, treatment protocol to new protocol, pushing the boundaries of conventional and unconventional therapies, everything in an effort to relieve the near constant agony that was robbing him of sleep and health and life.

“... when the crisis simply continues without resolution,” Ross wrote, “when the illness grinds on and on and on – well, then a curtain tends to fall, because there isn’t an obvious way to integrate that kind of struggle into the realm of everyday life.” It’s hard in the midst of a struggle that brings so much anguish and so little relief, to hold onto hope.

While few of us have known the scourges of Lyme Disease, many of us know the creeping, sinking, darkness of despair. “Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship,” writes Susan Sontag, “in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”² All of us know what it’s like to

¹ Ross Douthat, *The Deep Places: A Memoir of Illness and Discovery*. New York: Convergent Books, 2021, pp. 13-15.

² Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1977, p. 3.

feel the darkness roll in - the resentment and the outrage that comes from falling victim to injustice; the anger and loneliness that comes from a ruined relationship or a broken household; the anxiety and fear that accompanies a dangerous diagnosis; the pain and suffering that accompanies our foray into the kingdom of the sick; the cavity and emptiness left in the aftermath of a loss; and the darkness that joins us in our descent into the valley of shadows.

Around our country, thousands endure the despair of rising inflation and falling incomes, of watching alcoholism and addiction consume their loved ones. In Kentucky or Puerto Rico, some have lost everything to the powerful surge of floodwaters. In California and New Mexico, others have lost everything to the roaring rage of fire. In Ukraine, thousands mourn the loved ones lost in the midst of an uninvited and unjust war, while millions of refugees scattered around the world wonder if they will ever return home, and whether there will still be a home to which they can return. Around the world freedoms erode, corruption abounds, and tyranny rises.

As Rabbi Naomi Levy writes: “Who isn’t longing for something? Who hasn’t suffered? Who hasn’t gotten stuck or confused, or lost? Who hasn’t taken a wrong turn? Who isn’t frightened?”³

The root of despair is found not only in the hurt but in the helplessness. Powerless in the face of such daunting challenges and overwhelming problems, it’s easy to give in to the darkness.

The Psalmist cries out: “*MiMa-amakim Keraticha, Adonai* – From out of the depths, I call to you Adonai.” (Psalm 130:1). And through it all, the response comes, in paragraphs of pleas, in poetry and prose, the holy language of hope.

The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks of Great Britain wrote: “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. ... Judaism is the religion, and Israel the home, of hope.”⁴

There are many different kinds of hope. I have spent years hoping that the Marlins would field a competitive baseball team. I have spent many election nights hoping for a particular candidate to win, and many other nights hoping a hurricane would blow in a different direction. I have sat in waiting rooms with loved ones, hoping a surgery would be successful. And as a parent, I’ve spent countless hours desperately hoping my kids would see all their dreams come true.

But hope is more than active wishing for a desired outcome. Hope requires the willingness to embrace the possibility of a future different than the present and the readiness to help bring it about.”⁵

³ Naomi Levy, *Hope Will Find You*. New York: Harmony Books, 2010, p. xi.

⁴ “Future Tense”, by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, published in *The Jewish Chronicle* April 1, 2008

⁵ David Arnow, *Choosing Hope*. Philadelphia, JPS, 2022, p. xiv.

When Moses meets the Holy One for the first time, he asks to know God's name. And God responds cryptically, "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* – I will be what I will be." To find God, we need to look to the future, to be willing to walk toward a horizon that is constantly changing and uncertain. "Like God in whose image we are created, we are not defined by the past or present," writes David Arnow. "... together with God, we inhabit an open future, the place where hope resides."⁶

Mystical tradition teaches that implanted in the core of each of our souls is what we call in Hebrew a *Nikud*. It is the source of our inner light, our ingenuity, our desires, our passions, and our creativity. It is the wellspring of our capacity for compassion and love, for outrage in the face of ignorance and injustice, for the cultivation of wisdom and understanding.

But there are times when the light of that *Nikud* is shrouded in the darkness of despair, when a curtain of pain and anguish blocks out the light, and in the darkness we wander off onto paths of callousness, arrogance, selfishness, dishonesty, greed, or insincerity. We sometimes look at what we chose to write on our page in the Book of Life with "shame, guilt, and despair, but also hope – hope that with sufficient effort we can change for the better."⁷

Hope, David Arnow teaches, is inseparable from *teshuvah*, our process of repentance. Hope is the gateway to *teshuvah* because hope says we can change. Despair says we can't. ... The primary meaning of *teshuvah*, 'return,' reminds us that once, maybe long ago, we were closer to our best selves, and that a kernel of that best self still resides within us."⁸

Hope is the process of actively working to dispel despair, of embracing the possibility of change, no matter how remote that possibility may seem. As Rebecca Solnit writes, "Hope locates itself in the premise that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty [there] is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes."⁹ And if with hope you can change yourself, with hope you can change the world.

Years ago I knew a man who had weathered a painful divorce. Caught in the middle were his teenage children, who were influenced by their mother to despise their father. Parental Alienation took its toll, and his relationship with his daughters became a nightmare. They refused to see him, or even to speak with him on the phone. Birthday cards were returned to him unopened, and messages and emails were met with replies dripping in vitriol and profanity. The pain he suffered was nearly unbearable.

One day as we were speaking, I suggested to him: "You know, for your own sake and your own sanity, you may just need to let them go." He looked at me and said, "I will never give up on my daughters. Ever. They can hurl whatever they want at me. I will never walk away from them. I will never give up on them. Never."

⁶ Ibid., p. xvii.

⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope In the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016, p. xiv.

For years he continued to reach out to them, and over time, things began to soften. Gradually, his children came back. One eventually came to live with him, and work with him in his office, and today he is close with both his children.

Hope realizes nothing without perseverance. Hope is the fuel God provides us to endure, to keep moving forward no matter how bleak it all may seem, to keep reaching for that vision of the future we seek to build, even if that future seems elusive and out of reach.

The Torah itself is the greatest story of hope ever told. After the Israelites realize they will be forced to wander for forty years before entering the Promised Land, something extraordinary happens. They keep walking. One foot in front of the other, they refuse to relinquish their hope. There are moments when they stumble into rebellion and complaint, but onward they continue to march. Like Moses' mother Yocheved, who clung to hope in the darkest of hours, they too bring children into the world, passing on their hopes and dreams to the next generation so that their children may see their dreams realized, even if they will not live to see it themselves. It takes courage to hold onto hope, and it takes hope to hold onto courage.

Ross Douthat found hope in slowly learning that each day was a chance to keep fighting, to keep searching for answers, to keep learning, trying, and hoping.¹⁰ Hope is not the optimistic expectation of relief – hope is the power to choose how one moves forward into the uncertainty.

But if we can hold onto hope, and push away despair, if we refuse to let go our vision of returning to our best selves, if we refuse to relinquish our dreams for what the world can and ought to be, we may find that, step by step, we too reach that Promised Land.

Through millennia of exile and diaspora, the humiliation of persecution, the torture of Inquisition, the wanderings of expulsion, and the bloodshed of pogroms, every Passover our people gathered around the seder table to tell our story of hope and liberation. And year after year, we concluded with the shout: “Next Year In Jerusalem!”

But in the late 19th century, Jews began to reimagine those dreams. In a settlement called “*Petach Tikvah* – the opening of hope,” Jews returned to plant in the rocky soil of their ancient homeland saplings and seedlings of hope.

A few years later, a young journalist named Theodor Herzl concluded that the only solution to the “Jewish question” was Jewish statehood. “If you will it,” he wrote, “then it is no dream.”

Herzl may have radiated an external confidence, but also struggled through bouts of despair. After writing “*Der Judenstaat* – The Jewish State”, a Jewish journalist compared Herzl to a “Jewish Jules Verne”. A friend wondered if the manuscript was a joke or something meant to be serious. But Herzl refused to succumb to despair. And last month we celebrated the 125th anniversary of the first Zionist Congress he convened in Basel.

¹⁰ Op. Cit. Douthat, pp. 193-194.

Herzl's dream inspired a generation to persevere and work to make this hope a reality. It wasn't easy. In 1905, as pogroms swept through Russia, and work to build a Zionist enclave in Warsaw sputtered, David Ben-Gurion, in a moment of frustration and despair declared: "I ask for nothing of life. I want neither pleasures nor education, not honor and not love, I'll give it all up, all I want is one thing – hope!!! I ask for the ability to hope and believe and then I am prepared to bear the hardest labor and the heaviest yoke."¹¹

And from the grit and determination of the thousands who made their way to Palestine, and the millions more who shared in that hope around the world, on May 14, 1948, Ben Gurion stood beneath a portrait of Theodor Herzl, the man who had kindled that flame of hope in his heart fifty years before, and declared the independence of the State of Israel, the first Jewish state in nearly two-thousand years. And immediately, everyone there in Meir Dizengoff's house in Tel Aviv broke out in song:

<i>Kol Od Balevav Penima</i>	As long as within our hearts
<i>Nefesh Yehudi Homiyah</i>	The Jewish soul sings,
<i>U-L'fatei Mizrach Kadima</i>	As long as forward to the East
<i>Ayin L'Tzion Tzofiah</i>	To Zion, looks the eye –
<i>Od Lo Avda Tikvateinu</i>	Our hope is not yet lost,
<i>HaTikvah Bat Sh'not Alpayim</i>	The hope two thousand years old,
<i>L'Hiyot Am Chofshi, B'Artzeinu</i>	To be a free people in our land
<i>Eretz Tziyon, ViYerushalayim.</i>	The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

Recalling Tennyson, Ross Douthat writes: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield... The gift of chronic illness is the space and opportunity to strive and seek. The purpose of the illness in your life has to involve finding something – finding strength in learning how to endure, finding virtue in how to live for others, finding some hidden truth in unraveling the mystery of what actually ails you. And not to yield is often the hardest task of all. ... I have seen the world from way down underneath, I have done things I couldn't have imagined, I have fought, and fought, and fought. And I am still alive."¹²

It was hope that held our people together through forty years in the desert. It was hope that held our people together through two millennia of wandering through history. It was hope that served as the foundation for the Jewish state reborn. And it is hope that will bring us through the trials we experience in our lives.

In this New Year 5783, let us get busy building the future of our dreams. "The future we hope for is waiting for us to create it."¹³

¹¹ Quoted in Op. Cit. Arnow, p. 164.

¹² Op. Cit. Douthat, pp. 196-197.

¹³ Op. Cit. Arnow, p. 222.