

From the Rabbi's Desk
Rabbi Manes Kogan
Hillcrest Jewish Center

Neither Pessimism, Nor Optimism: Calculated Hope! D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah 5786

With appreciation to my colleagues and friends, Rabbis Joshua Kullock, Claudio Kupchik, and Fabian Werbin



Sometime in the mid-1990s, British Prime Minister John Major reportedly asked Russian President Boris Yeltsin to describe the Russian economy in one word. Yeltsin replied, "Good." Seeking greater detail, Major asked Yeltsin if he could describe it in two words. Yeltsin replied, "Not good."

If you would allow me two words to describe this past year, since last Rosh Hashanah, I would say, paraphrasing Russian President Boris Yeltsin, *ne khorosho* – *no good*.

Last October in Chicago, a Jewish man walking to synagogue was shot. The shooter was arrested, charged with terrorism and a hate crime. The victim survived. Three days later, in Brooklyn, a visibly Jewish man was slashed in the face, with antisemitic intent. In December, in Miami, a kosher restaurant was firebombed by a man shouting antisemitic slogans (he was arrested, no fatalities occurred, but there was property damage, and it spread a deep fear among the community).

Last January, an Orthodox Jewish man was violently assaulted on the street in Crown Heights. Last April, Cody Balmer attempted to firebomb the home of Pennsylvania's Jewish Governor Josh Shapiro on Passover night. Last May, a gunman killed two Israeli embassy staffers outside the Capital Jewish Museum during a reception in Washington, D.C.

These are just a few of the antisemitic events since last Rosh Hashanah, here in the United States.

In Israel, we could also use the two Hebrew words: *Lo Tov – No Good*, to describe most events related to the Jewish state. Hostages are still in Gaza, with very little hope regarding their well-being, after almost two years of captivity. Israel's stand in the public opinion is the lowest since its creation in 1948, and Prime Minister Netanyahu, holding to power, thanks to a coalition of racists, parasites, and corrupt individuals, doesn't make things better.

However, the two Russian words, *ne khorosho – no good*, are not limited to the physical and mental well-being of the Jews in America or Israel. With increasing urgency and horror, we have been witnessing the terrible upsurge in lack of civility and political violence that threatens to tear our country apart.

Perhaps you heard the joke (not too funny) on the difference between a pessimist Jew and an optimist Jew. The pessimist Jew says: The situation is so bad, it cannot get any worse than this. And of course, the optimist Jew says: Yes, it can.

Let's talk a little more about pessimists and optimists. Any pessimists here? Any optimists? A pessimist says: the situation is so bad, so desperate, that there is nothing we can do. The optimist, on the other hand, says: the situation is under control; there is nothing we need to do.

The optimist and the pessimist, at their extremes, perhaps confirming the well-known assertion that opposites are interconnected, share something in common: complete inaction. Either because there is nothing they can do, or because there is nothing they need to do; in the end, the fully optimistic and pessimistic do... nothing.

Let's explore how optimism and pessimism find their way in today's Torah portion and haftarah.

In this morning's Torah portion, we encounter Hagar. Abraham expels her and Ishmael (a topic for another d'var Torah) and they wander about in the wilderness of *Beer-sheba*. We read in the Torah:

When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, "Let me not

look on as the child dies." And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears (Genesis 21:15-16).

Hagar, beaten by pessimism, believes there is nothing she can do to change her fate.

In today's haftarah, we encounter *Hannah, the barren wife of Elkana. Elkana loved Hannah and when she cried because the Lord had closed her womb, Elkanah, the optimist, would say: "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (I Samuel 1: 8).*

Hagar the pessimist says to herself: the situation is desperate; there is nothing I can do. Elkana, the optimist, says to Hannah: the situation isn't so bad, there is nothing you need to do.

In between these two opposites of inaction lies hope.

The late Professor C. R. Snyder, one of the central figures in hope research, says, and I am paraphrasing: *"...the optimistic person believes that somehow—either through luck, the actions of others, or one's own random actions—that his or her future will be successful and fulfilling. The hopeful person, on the other hand, believes specifically in his or her own capability for securing a successful and fulfilling future."*¹

In simpler English:

Optimism is linked to wishful thinking. Hope, on the other hand, involves intention, determination, action, and direction.

Let's now explore how hope transforms Hagar and Hannah's stories.

In Hagar's story, God is the one who first delivers words of hope:

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Genesis 21:17-18). But then Hagar, "God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and let the boy drink" (Genesis 21:19).

¹ [https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-science-behind-behavior/201702/whats-the-difference-between-optimism-and-hope.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-science-behind-behavior/201702/whats-the-difference-between-optimism-and-hope)

All Hagar needs to move from pessimism to hope is a little push. Then, she moves into action.

In Hannah's story, she is the one who moves from the Pollyannaish disconnected optimism of her husband to a calculated hope. And so, we read:

Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up... In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly... and she made a vow, saying, "Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life... (1 Samuel 1:9-11).

Optimism and pessimism are feelings, just feelings, and there is not too much we can do about them.

Hope, on the other hand, is not just a feeling; it is a commitment. Hope requires courage. That's why King David says (Psalms 27:14): *Hope in the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; and Hope in the Lord.*

Hope requires both awareness and faith. You are aware that the situation is not good, and yet you believe, and pray, that things are going to improve.

And speaking of prayer, prayer gets a bad reputation. We all heard the expression: "there is nothing we can do; let's pray!" I would like to invite you to think about prayer as something you can do! We need to bring prayer into our lives. What if prayer was not our last resort, but our first one?

Last, but not least, hope requires action.

Abraham Joshua Heschel told a story about a town that had "all the necessary municipal institutions" -- a law court, cemetery, a hospital, a bathhouse and many types of craftsmen. There were tailors, bakers, shoemakers, carpenters and bricklayers. But the town lacked a watchmaker. Over the years, most of the town's clocks became what Heschel called "annoyingly inaccurate." All the clocks in the town showed different times. Most people stopped winding their clocks. They thought, why bother? Their clocks ran down. One person, however, continued to wind her clock, day after day, year after year, even though the clock did not keep accurate time. The years passed. One day, a watchmaker moved to the town. Everybody was happy.

People brought their clocks to the new watchmaker to fix, but the only clock he could repair was the one that had been wound, the only one that had been kept running.

Hope is the awareness that the clocks don't work, and the resolution to continue to wind them.

How are things in the United States, in Israel, in the world?

Ne khorosho – no good.

I know that something is really broken here, but I will continue to wind my clock. I confess I don't know how to fix the world's problems, but that won't prevent me from working on what I can and should do to address them.

Here is my commitment to you:

I will strive to remain kind and compassionate; I will keep my discourse civil, I will watch my words, and I will build bridges. Echoing the teachings of Rabbi Shai Held, I will fight hatred with love, coarseness with understanding, and devastating pessimism with calculated hope.

I will join the moral resistance of the silent majority, who don't want the extremes, who believe that there is more to life than kill or be killed.

I will be a leader for my shul, for my community, and I will continue to believe that the silent majority will soon wake up and choose the leaders we deserve, better leaders than the ones we have.

And I will pray.

I will pray to HaShem for a better year, a year in which *"no longer will violence be heard in our land, nor ruin or destruction within our borders"* (after Isaiah 60:18).

I will pray to HaShem for the courage to hope, not to give up. I will ask HaShem to open my eyes as he did to Hagar to help me see what I can do to make things better.

And I will pray to HaShem for me and for my family, for you and all your loved ones, for our fragmented country, our wounded State of Israel, and our broken world, for a year of peace and contentment, a year of joy and plenty, a year of meaning and hope, a good and sweet year.

Amen.