



The Imperative of Hope

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Asarah b'Tevet (the 10th of the month of Tevet), marks the beginning of the end of the First Temple. It was on 10th Tevet that the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar lay siege to Jerusalem, building towers all around it (2 Kings 25:1-2). This siege, which began in about 589 BCE, continued for 30 months, until the Babylonians succeeded in destroying Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BCE. 10th Tevet marks the first of the cycle of three fasts that we dedicate to the destruction of the Temple. In Tammuz, six months from now, we will mark the breaching of the walls of the Second Temple, and just three weeks after that in the month of Av, we mark the destruction of both the First and Second Temples.

10th Tevet, then, marks the beginning of a 30-month period in which the Jews in Jerusalem found themselves pressed on all sides, overcome by the army of the Babylonian empire, with little hope in sight. What was it like for them to be at the beginning of this period of great uncertainty? Did they hold on to hope and, if so, what was the nature of that hope? Or, from the beginning, could they only think about the end, fearing their own destruction at the hands of the Babylonians? 30 months is a long time to be in a suspended state of uncertainty, fearful of the worst.



Noah, like those living under siege in Jerusalem, also lived with great uncertainty: would God destroy the world with the Flood or would the world not be destroyed? Rashi notes that Noah went into the ark “because of the waters of the Flood,” meaning that Noah didn’t go into the ark because God told him to, but only when the Flood actually came and the waters forced him inside.¹

Rashi on Genesis 7:7

רש"י בראשית ז:ז

Even Noah was of those people who are wanting in faith: he believed and he did not believe that the Flood would come, and he would not enter the ark until the waters forced him to do so.

אף נח מקטני אמונה היה, מאמין ואינו מאמין שביבא המבול, ולא נכנס לתבה עד שדחקוהו המים:

Rashi teaches that Noah was a person of little faith. He believed enough that the Flood was coming to build the ark, but he didn’t believe enough that the end was near to get inside the ark.

R. Avi Killip writes that “Noah was able to to both ‘believe’ and ‘not believe’ simultaneously... Maybe pure belief, *emunah shelemah*, would have been too overwhelming and debilitating? Was the disposition that allowed Noah to work, day after day, building an ark some magic combination of belief and disbelief?”²

I wonder about this for the people that had to endure the siege on Jerusalem, day in and day out, for 30 long months. Did they manage to maintain hope despite the increasingly difficult conditions throughout that period? Did they maintain that hope in the same way that Noah did, through a delicate balance between belief and disbelief?

¹ Rashi’s interpretation is based on Genesis Rabbah 32:6.

² R. Avi Killip, “Belief in the Face of Climate Change,” available here: <https://hebrewcollege.edu/blog/belief-and-disbelief-in-the-face-of-climate-change/>.



I find myself in these past two months also moving between belief and disbelief, hope and despair, trying to find the right balance to confront the very real painful reality in which we are living, while also maintaining a sense of hope that there is a path forward.

R. Kalonyous Kalman Shapira, writing from the Warsaw Ghetto, has much to teach us about what it means to maintain hope in a period of devastation and uncertainty. Hope, for R. Shapira, is both a danger and a necessity.³ R. Shapira teaches, “a person needs to hope at every moment to be saved by God.”⁴ It is this hope and belief in salvation that sustains us, even when there is no path forward. In his *derashah* for Hanukkah in 1941, he writes, “Faith is the foundation of everything.” Without faith, we are torn from God and it is as if our soul is in Gehenna (Hell).⁵ R. Shapira is writing this *derashah* just a year before the mass deportations of the Warsaw Ghetto. He knows what is coming. Yet he teaches that, even in these circumstances, hope is a necessity for survival, one that allows for some continued connection to God. Without hope, there is nothing and we are lost.

Perhaps it would be impossible for the people living during the siege on Jerusalem to have been without hope for such an extended period. It is hope that allows us to keep doing the necessary actions to keep ourselves alive.

The Talmud teaches that unless it is abundantly clear that in a given situation there is no hope of a positive outcome, there is always hope. The Talmud (Yevamot 121a) tells the story of R. Akiva, traveling at sea, who witnessed R. Meir’s boat capsize into the waves around him. R. Akiva is distraught and mourns the loss of his colleague R. Meir, who surely drowned. Yet,

³ See what I wrote for Hanukkah 5782, “The Resilience to Rebuild, Reconsecrate and Rededicate,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/resilience-rebuild-reconsecrate-and-rededicate>.

⁴ Eish Kodesh, Parshat Zakhor, 1942.

⁵ Eish Kodesh, Hanukkah, 1941.



when R. Akiva arrives at his destination, who is sitting before him teaching? None other than R. Meir. Based on this, R. Akiva remarks:

Talmud Bavli Yevamot 121a

תלמוד בבלי יבמות קכא.

How great are the words of the sages! For they said, “[If a man fell into] water with an end—his wife is permitted [to remarry]; water without an end—his wife is forbidden [to remarry].”

כמה גדולים דברי חכמים, שאמרו: מים שיש להם סוף — אשתו מותרת, מים שאין להם סוף — אשתו אסורה.

This story is based on the *halakhah* that a woman can only be permitted to remarry in a situation in which her husband can be presumed dead. If there’s a chance he’s still alive, then she’s not permitted to remarry, but must wait until her husband’s status can be confirmed. While the implications for the woman waiting to remarry are potentially problematic, this story is teaching us something important about hope.

According to this text, if someone falls into a body of water, like a small lake, in which it’s possible to see the shore on all sides, then it’s clear whether or not the person survives. One either sees them come up on land or one doesn’t. All outcomes are clear. But, if as in the case of R. Meir, a person falls into a body of water in which the shore is not visible, who can say whether or not the person may resurface on land, out of the onlooker’s eyesight? Even in a situation as dire as a person falling into a vast ocean of turbulent waves, the Talmud is teaching that we have to maintain hope that they may in fact emerge on the other side. In situations in which we cannot see the shoreline—or in situations in which the end is not clear—we must maintain hope.

In our lives, we sometimes find ourselves in periods of uncertainty, perhaps fearing a negative outcome on the other end—even, as in Jerusalem or in Rabbi Meir’s danger, a very likely negative outcome. How do we maintain a sense of hope for such a prolonged period of time,



when we are uncertain of the result? How do we believe and not believe in the right proportion to allow us to keep moving through our lives without giving in to despair? As R. Killip writes, “we must each find the balance between hope and fear, between belief and disbelief, that will allow us the strength and courage to move forward.”⁶

10th Tevet marks the beginning of a prolonged period of uncertainty and despair for the Jewish people. As we attempt to identify with the experience of those under siege in Jerusalem, may we take this opportunity to reflect on our own capacity to hold uncertainty and to hope against despair. As the Talmud teaches, in moments when you cannot see the shore on all sides, when the outcome is unclear, hold on to hope. May we strike the right balance of belief and disbelief, hope and acceptance, holding on to hope in moments when we feel capable of hope, and allowing ourselves to disbelieve in times in which to believe would be just too much.

⁶ See n. 2 above.

