

ROSH HASHANA 5770

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Every year as Rosh Hashana approaches, I know that many of you utter the same prayer: Please, O Eternal One, may St Kilda be in the Grand Final! This proves that hope springs eternal. It also proves that prayer works. Of course, not everyone prays for St Kilda. Some people even at TBI may substitute the name of another footy team, but it's the same prayer. Sometimes we find ourselves searching for hope in unlikely places!

The reality is that as human beings, but especially as Jews, we live in a dangerous, unpredictable world in which hope is at a premium. Rosh Hashana is Janus-faced: it looks backward to a year in which hope was too often frustrated, and forward to a year that we can bear only if we have hope that it will turn out well. Every year we wish one another **shana tova umetuka**, a year that is good and sweet. Too often, at the conclusion of the year we see that it has been anything but "good and sweet".

I prefer the greeting that I received from a member of our choir: "May your good health be confirmed by your dentist, gastroenterologist, urologist, psychologist, optician and fortune-teller, and may your physiotherapist, chiropractor, witch doctor and slimming clinic tell you that you don't have to come any more. May your salary, your housing subsidy, the contents of your house and all your shares increase in value. May your blood pressure, weight, mortgage and cholesterol all decrease. May your friends remember you and may the taxman forget you. May you have an intelligent Prime Minister and may your footy team win the grand final!"

In my case at least, I fear that most of these wishes amount to vain expressions of hope!

But over the course of the year I do come across intimations of hope that are not in vain, that inspire me for the year to come. This Rosh Hashana I'd like to share with you two very different expressions of hope that I encountered over the past year.

The first comes from a speech that was published by Jerusalem Post in May 2009, 4 months ago. The speech was delivered by Elena Bonner who had been invited by the Freedom Foundation in Oslo, Norway, to address them. Elena Bonner is the widow of Andrei Sakharov. Sakharov was one of the Soviet Union's greatest physicists. He is often called the Father of the Russian Atomic Bomb. He was highly decorated in Russia for his scientific achievements. Then, in the 1960s he became one of Russia's foremost dissidents and human rights activists, as well as a campaigner for nuclear disarmament. Championing intellectual freedom for all, he faced internal exile to Gorki where he was continually harassed. Sakharov won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1975 but he was denied permission to attend the ceremony, so his wife Elena Bonner went in his place.

Bonner was asked by the Freedom Foundation in Oslo to speak about her life, the suffering she endured and how she was able to bear it all. But, undoubtedly to the chagrin of the Foundation, she chose to speak instead of Israel and the Jews. This was a remarkable choice of topic, especially in Norway, as she commented: "Many Norwegians would be surprised at how sharply their contemporary view of Israel differs from the view of Sakharov." Sakharov was not Jewish. Yet this is what Bonner quotes from his writings: "Israel has an indisputable right to exist." "Israel has a right to existence within safe borders." "All wars that Israel has waged have been just, forced upon it by the irresponsibility of Arab leaders." "With all the money that has been invested in the problem of the Palestinians, it would have been possible long ago to resettle them and provide them with good lives in Arab countries."

In her talk, Elena Bonner spoke of the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, especially since "9/11", the attack on the World Trade Center's twin towers in 2001. She refers in particular to the United Nation's conference

against racism in Durban, South Africa, at which Israel became the paradigm for racism and colonialism in eyes of the world. [If Elena was speaking today, she might also have referred to the Gaza Fact Finding Mission's Report compiled by Justice Goldstone of South Africa.] She spoke of her disappointment at the course of the Nobel Peace Prize, once the "highest moral award of our civilisation", but now, she says, "I cannot understand and accept the fact that Andrei Sakharov and Yasser Arafat share membership in the club of Nobel laureates." She expressed her concerns about the creation of a Palestinian state that will, virtually by definition, be "Judenfrei", and her fears for a "Judenfrei Holy land". She referred to Gaza where "today there is already not a single Jew."

The situation as she describes it seems hopeless. But then she goes on to find that glimmer of hope. She locates it in the figure of Gilad Shalit – the Israeli soldier abducted by Hamas in June 2006 (over three years ago), and whom we at TBI and in other synagogues around the world remember every Shabbat with a special prayer; for whom an empty chair sits on our bimah week in and week out. Sometimes we may wonder why we do this; Elena Bonner helps us to understand. She suggests that the reason why Shalit's release is not a major human rights concern, such as the Guantanamo prisoners have been, is that he is an Israeli soldier, a Jew. But she goes on "And yet I still think (and some will find this naïve) that the first tiny, but real step toward peace must become the release of Shalit." To me what she is saying is this: as long as we keep Gilad Shalit present in our prayers – as long as we remember him and continue to pray for his release – hope remains alive. Such a small thing, perhaps, in the sight of the world; but he symbolises for us the first step towards peace. We measure progress towards peace in single human lives. No-one would have known this better than Andrei Sakharov, campaigner for human rights and intellectual freedom in Russia, and his wife Elena Bonner.

The entire edifice of Judaism is constructed on this foundation. All hope, all possibility is based on small symbolic actions, one at a time. Even the sounding of the shofar alerts us to hope for the coming year through a small, otherwise insignificant action. I recall once reading the response of a rabbi to a challenging question about the "minutiae" of Jewish observance. The correspondent asked the rabbi, "Why does the Jewish religion seem to obsess over insignificant details? Is this nitpicking what Jews call spirituality?" The questioner then added, "I actually sent you this question over a week ago and didn't receive a reply. Could it be that you have finally been asked a question that you can't answer?!"

The rabbi responded by email: "I never claimed to have all the answers.... But it happens to be that I did answer your question, and you did get the answer. I sent a reply immediately. The fact that you didn't receive it is itself the answer to your question." The rabbi went on to explain: "I sent you a reply, but I wrote your email address leaving out the "dot" before the "com". I figured that you should still receive the email, because after all, it is only one little dot missing.... It's not as if I wrote the wrong name or something drastic like that!" "Would anyone be so nitpicky as to differentiate between "yahoocom" and "yahoo.com"? Isn't it a bit ridiculous that you didn't get my email just because of a little dot?"

The rabbi's point, of course, is that the dot is not just a dot; it has meaning far beyond its apparent size. If he can't see it, that's simply due to his ignorance of the ways of the web. But without the dot, the message is lost to oblivion. So, too, with the symbols of Judaism. And so, too, with a single person, Gilad Shalit. So, Elena Bonner is right; everything may hinge on the destiny of this single soldier. By remembering him every week at TBI, we keep alive the hope for peace that is associated with his destiny.

The second intimation of hope that I came upon this year is captured in a story concerning two elderly men who occupied the same hospital room. The man next to the room's only window was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon; the other man had to spend all his time on his back. The men talked for hours on end, sharing the stories of their lives: wives and families, homes, jobs, holidays they'd enjoyed.

Every afternoon, when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window. The man in the other bed began to live for those one hour periods where his world would be broadened by all the activity and colour of the world

outside. The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake. Ducks and swans played on the water while children sailed model boats. Young lovers walked arm in arm amidst flowers of every colour and a fine view of the city skyline could be seen in the distance. As the man by the window described all this in detail, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and imagine the scene. One warm afternoon the man by the window described a parade passing by. Although his companion could not hear the band, he could see it in his mind's eye.

Days and weeks passed like this.

One morning the day nurse arrived and found the lifeless body of the man by the window. He had died peacefully in his sleep. Attendants came to remove his body. When it seemed appropriate, the other man asked if he could be moved next to the window. The nurse was happy to make the switch, and after making sure he was comfortable she left him alone.

Slowly, painfully he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the real world outside. He strained to turn himself slowly to look out the window beside the bed.

It faced a blank wall.

When the nurse returned later in the day, the man asked her what could have compelled his deceased roommate to describe such wonderful things outside this window. The nurse responded that the man was blind and could not see even the wall. She said, "Perhaps he just wanted to encourage you. Perhaps he just wanted to give you hope."

As with any parable, we need to ask ourselves what the characters represent. I would like to think that, in this parable, we are the blind man by the window. When we look at the future we are indeed blind; the future is like a blank wall. In our mind's eye, though, we can see what the future might be like; we can project our imaginings onto the screen of our mind and see what sort of world we'd like to inhabit. Then we can live our days in the context of that vision, striving to make it happen, bringing new hope into our world.

Even more – and this I believe is the real thrust of the parable – we can share our vision with others who might otherwise live in despair. Through an appreciation for our common humanity we can care for one another by giving hope to each other, even when things seem bleak and hopeless.

Let's be clear about what 'hope' is. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests in his latest book, *Future Tense*, the human-induced wrongs that we meet in this world are not written into the structure of the universe. Attitudes, positions, judgments can change. The human spirit is capable of being lifted. That is what hope is about. Each of us has the capacity to bring colour and vitality into the life of another person, simply by sharing the world of our imaginings - the world of possibilities, of hope - with them.

It seems to me that this is the purpose for any community, and the reason why we as human beings are drawn to community. Here in community we come together to share our visions, our hopes. TBI is such a community. It is our community, - a community of visionaries, of dreamers, where our symbols can become real, where hope endures.

May hope endure for all of us for the coming year – **shana tova umetuka**: May the new year truly be good and sweet, a harbinger for hope.