

Living with Hope

Yom Kippur Morning 5777 – October 10, 2016
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
Rabbi Avi M. Schulman

Yom Kippur is a day of judgment. The words of the Unetaneh Tokef tell of God weighing our deeds, determining whether we will be written and inscribed in the Book of Life. Though we cannot ultimately determine our fate, we are assured that teshuvah, t'filah and tzedakah – a return to the right path through prayer and righteous acts - avert the severity of the decree.

No one can completely control the length of our days on this earth, but surely we have the power to determine the quality of our lives. The Talmudic sage, Raba, states that when we die and are brought before the throne of Judgment we will be asked this question: Tzipita L'yeshua? Did you live your life with hope?

For most of us, this is an enormously challenging question. Surely there are people who are blessed with naturally sunny dispositions. They look at life with boundless optimism; always expecting people to behave their best. Then there are others who are by nature pessimists. They look at the world around them with apprehension and fear.

Most of us fall somewhere in between. Perhaps the phrase “cautiously optimistic” might best express this approach to life. It is a balance between realism and optimism. To be cautiously optimistic does not deny the reality of hard facts. But it does not allow harsh realities to overwhelm and lead to despair.

Cautious optimism seeks equilibrium between reality and hope. As we begin this New Year of 5777, it is essential that we be cautiously optimistic. As we take a close look at the situation of Jews around the world, the condition of Jews in America, and most specifically, the prospect of Jewish continuity at Temple Beth Torah, it is essential that we do so grounded in reality and also with hope.

First, let us examine the situation of Jews around the world. In doing so, we might agree with the famous opening sentence of Charles Dickens' classic, *A Tale of Two Cities*, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” We are rightfully concerned about the situation of Jews around the world. The increase in anti-Semitic actions against Jews in South America, in Poland, Ukraine, South Africa, in the United Kingdom, and especially in France have been cause for deep concern. Synagogues, Jewish communal organizations, and even a kosher grocery store have been targets for murder. My cousin Howard and his wife, Nicole, have lived for many years in a suburb of Paris. In the face of virulent anti-Semitism, Nicole fears for the future of French

Jewry, the largest Jewish community in Europe. She expressed to me her relief that her three adult daughters do not live in France but instead reside in the United Kingdom, Israel, and the United States.

This sense of endangerment was personalized when I decided to travel to Poland and Germany last fall. Prior to my departure, a close friend urged me not to wear in public a kippah lest I be subject to attack. I disregarded her advice. I did not feel personally threatened at any time in my journey. However, Jewish residents of Poland and Germany certainly are aware of their minority status.

Do Jews around the world despair? Some do, of course. Some see the rise of right wing nationalist parties as highly threatening. Nativist ideology feeds off the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees across Europe. Anti-immigrant hatred can spill over to Jews who may also be perceived as outsiders. Jews who fear they can no longer live freely in their home countries are emigrating in increasing numbers.

However, the vast majority of Jews around the world do not fear widespread rise of anti-Semitism such as we experienced last century. They trust in the vigilance of their governments to offer protection. Following anti-Semitic incidents, acts of solidarity by local citizens and elected officials lead many Jews to remain cautiously optimistic about the future. The presence of a Jewish state serves as a source of reassurance for Jews around the globe.

That's not to say that Israel itself does not face dire threats. Israel is a country that throughout its 68 years has lived with the dread of annihilation. Can there be any doubt that there are those who hate the very idea of a Jewish state and wish for its destruction? Can anyone credibly deny that Iran's goal in developing nuclear weapons is solely for what they call "peaceful purposes," but instead serves as an existential threat to the existence of Israel? And though the Iran nuclear deal has rolled back Iran's nuclear program for the next ten years, it has not eradicated it.

Leon Wieseltier, former literary editor of *The New Republic*, rightly admonishes us to check our pessimism, when he notes, that "it is Israelis who command an army and an air force and also a nuclear arsenal. These instruments of warfare are themselves conclusions properly drawn from a severe history in which Jews lacked the means of self-reliance and self-defense."

We should also note that the Israelis I know – and whom you know – tend not to lean toward pessimism. Israelis may be hard-nosed realists, they are tough and opinionated. They also are optimists, trusting in their initiative, their creativity, and their willingness to overcome any obstacle with a "can do" attitude. They may argue vociferously about the condition of the country, decrying corruption at home and threats in the region, but they are hopeful they can overcome any challenge.

And what about Jews here in America? Are these the best of times or the worst? In the United States, Jewish life is undergoing massive changes that are impacting our

communal strength and vitality. Increased mobility in our society has unshackled Jews from urban centers and neighborhoods where Jewish life flourished. College campuses teem with anti-Israel sentiment and Jewish college students often feel besieged and overwhelmed by the BDS movement. Jewish federations, which have been fund-raising juggernauts for decades, have seen a steady decline in their annual campaigns. Some religious denominations, especially Conservative Judaism, have seen a dramatic decrease in their membership. In the post-World War II era, Conservative Judaism was highly attractive to our parents and grandparents generations, defining itself as mid-way between Orthodoxy and Reform. But our generation of Jews and our children find less appeal in a movement that attempts to straddle the middle. In the last 13 years, the number of Jews in Conservative congregations has fallen by 20%. Don't misunderstand me. There are splendid rabbis and scholars in the Conservative movement. But it is the ideology of Conservative Judaism that holds less appeal to contemporary Jews and the behavior of the majority of Jews who belong to Conservative congregations, their observance of Shabbat, of Kashrut, of festivals is hardly distinguishable from those of us who belong to Reform synagogues.

Reform congregations certainly face significant challenges as well. One of the key issues that all liberal denominations face is how to engage Jews who are in their 20's and 30's? The trend line is clear: Generation Xers and Millennials by and large are not attracted to joining congregations. They do not adhere to the model that those of us who are Baby Boomers or older followed. The antiquated model for affiliation was: when I am young, there is no need for me to join a congregation. But after I go off to college and get married and have children, then I will join a synagogue, especially so my children will receive a Jewish education.

I imagine that for many long-time members of this congregation fit into that model. But it's far less true for our adult children. There can be many reasons for this. It's been said that Millennials and Gen Xers are DIYs – they like to do things themselves. Want to stay connected to your Jewish friends? Social media enable you to be in constant contact with your friends wherever they live, nearby, across the country or around the world. You don't have to go to synagogue to be with your friends. If you do want to do something Jewish, you don't necessarily need a congregation. Want to celebrate Shabbat? Invite folks over to your house for a good meal and great conversation. Want to celebrate a Jewish holiday? Go online and connect with any number of non-synagogue opportunities here in the Bay Area like Wilderness Torah, the Kitchen, or Moishe House. Want to learn more about Judaism? You don't need a synagogue for that. Study online with a Jewish scholar or participate in a class sponsored by Lehrhaus Judaica; or form your own study group via Kevah; or attend Limmud, a weekend of Jewish learning held in interesting places around the world.

In addition, many younger adults look at synagogue life and think: what's in it for me? Why participate when it seems like programs and activities are geared to an older age group? Why belong if you don't see your peers?

Engaging Jewish adults in their 20's and 30's is indeed a real challenge for synagogues in the 21st century. Some folks in the Jewish community are highly pessimistic about what the lack of affiliation from this age group portends for the future of American Jewry. This is a major challenge and one that needs to be addressed at every level of Jewish communal life. But for now, I want us to put aside our anxieties about the unaffiliated and focus instead on our own condition here at Temple Beth Torah. In our collective Cheshbon HaNefesh, our communal self-inquiry, how do we view ourselves as we enter this New Year 5777?

I am keenly aware that there are some folks who feel pessimistic about our congregation. From the perspective of long-time members of Temple, it may seem like our best days are behind us. They remember a time in which the congregation was constantly filled with energy and enthusiasm. Membership was at an all-time high; classrooms were filled with scores of children. In fact, Religious School on Sunday mornings had to be held in split sessions because not all the kids could fit into our nine classrooms at same time.

People remember when there was a wonderful youth choir at Temple. Folks recall when the Women of Temple Beth Torah or as it was previously called, Sisterhood, as well as Brotherhood were robust with members and programs. A number of Chavurot, groups of 8-10 Temple families, met to celebrate simchas, enjoy holidays, and form tight knit bonds. Our Mar-Win BBYO chapter was active with weekly programs that connected our teens with one another and to a network of teenagers around the Bay.

In our honest self-examination of our condition here at Temple, there is one other element in which the past seemed more vital than it is today: and that is the Purim Shpiel. Over the course of two decades, this congregation created and produced 12 shpiels that were amazing for their creativity and complexity. They were the equivalent of community theater productions. The shpiels served the purpose of bringing together a large group of people ranging from seniors to toddlers, all for the purpose of "putting on a show." It was justifiably a source of pride for the congregation.

But the last Purim shpiel, the Lion King, was in 2014. An attempt to create a new shpiel this past spring failed. There are a number of reasons why this occurred. But as we look to next year, it is fair to ask: In this age of complexity, when so many feel overextended and overtaxed, do people still have the desire to devote months to preparing, rehearsing, and performing a shpiel?

There is a loss to our congregation when we do not re-enact programs that have been part of our identity. There is a decrease in vitality when there is no significant increase in membership. There is a greater tendency to turn pessimistic when we look at statistical trends that have been occurring for years and project them out for decades to come.

But I say to you, with all honesty and candor, when I look at Temple Beth Torah, I am hopeful. In part, I am optimistic because I know that there is a strong tendency for

every Jewish generation to think that it will be the last. Sixty years ago, the philosopher Simon Rawidowicz published an essay entitled "Israel, The Every Dying People." He wrote, "The world has many images of the ... (Jewish people) but Jews have only one image of ourselves, of an expiring people, forever on the verge of ceasing to be. One who studies Jewish history will readily discover that there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora period which did not consider itself the final link in (the Jewish people's) chain."

Yet, as Jack Samosky reminded us in his D'var Torah on Rosh Hashanah morning, since the time of Abraham, Jews have been put to the test. We have not only survived cruel oppression but we have built and sustained vital Jewish communities around the world, including here at Temple Beth Torah.

Here in America we live in a time of unparalleled opportunity. We are the most affluent, well-educated, and influential Jewish community in history. The glass ceilings of academia, business, and politics have largely been broken. Indeed, so brilliantly have American Jews succeeded in adapting to life in the United States, that we have become a model for what other minorities can achieve in this country.

I am not a pessimist about Jewish life in America. As for Temple Beth Torah, there are a number of reasons why I am optimistic about the present and the future. Let me tell you why. The first reason is due to the character of this congregation. Compared to a lot of other synagogues I know, this congregation is doing remarkably well.

I have served three other synagogues in my rabbinate. All have faced tremendous turmoil at periods in their history. My first position was serving as the Assistant Rabbi at Temple Israel, in Dayton, Ohio. This was a historic congregation founded in 1850. Just before I joined the Temple, a large number of members left the congregation. A lot of younger families lived in the south of Dayton, ten miles from the synagogue. These families wanted a shul nearer to where they lived, so they started their own. The loss of nearly 100 young families was not only a financial blow to Temple Israel, it also was severely demoralizing. This split-off congregation engendered a great deal of animosity in the community. But guess what? After three decades, both synagogues are doing well.

Years later, I served as Associate Rabbi at Temple Sinai in Denver. Over its history it too faced great challenges. It was founded in the early 1960's as a breakaway from the long established Reform congregation. When Temple Sinai had enough members, they purchased land and erected their first buildings for worship and education. But it turns out the contractor was not very trustworthy nor was the work done right. Like the walls of Jericho, cracks soon appeared and all the buildings of the congregation were condemned. Did that hugely demoralizing experience prompt the membership to end their enterprise together? No, it did not. In time, a beautiful new campus was created and the congregation flourishes to this day.

Lastly, let me tell you about my former congregation in the Houston area. I have many wonderful memories of my years in Texas, but I also recall some times that were not so great. There were battles between different factions in the congregation. There were heated moments of confrontation at board meetings. Worst of all was a decision by the board that was ratified at an annual meeting to set a flat fee to be a member of the congregation. Anyone who sought financial relief from this fee had to meet with a review committee and bring their most recent tax returns so the committee could determine if they qualified for aid. Do you want to know how that decision affected membership? Within two months, 20% of the congregation had resigned or not renewed their membership. And yet, despite this calamity, the congregation eventually stabilized and this coming January will celebrate its 35th anniversary.

So, dear friends at Temple Beth Torah, I praise you for your stability, your commitment; your seriousness; your maturity; and your devotion. The core of our congregation is strong. Susan Schwartz spoke last night about our synagogue being a home for its members and I fully believe we are a community that is welcoming and supportive for everyone who walks through our doors. We are warm and haimish (unpretentious). People who come for the first time to our Shabbat services are never made to feel like an outsider. People reach out, they connect, and bring others into our community.

Our congregation is expansive in defining who we are. There was a time in which the typical members of TBT were a Caucasian married couple who had kids in religious school. But today, we are a much more diverse congregation. Our members may be single, gay, transgendered, or people of color. We are a beautiful rainbow of diversity. We embody audacious hospitality.

We are devoted to creating worship that is meaningful and inspiring. Pause for a moment and think about this: has our worship during these High Holy Days ever been better? Our new machzor, our choir and cantor, the music for these Days of Awe are amazing. In the weeks ahead, our celebration of Sukkot (with Pizza in the Hut!) and Simchat Torah, unrolling the Torah to encircle our entire community are wonderfully inspiring.

Our educational programs continue to flourish. Rabbi Eve during the course of her four years as Education Director nourished and developed our preschool and educational programs, filling them with vitality and originality. Building on her successes, Gan Sameach, under the direction of Annie Jacob, is almost filled to capacity. Laurie Bellet, Director of Congregational Learning, now brings new vision and creativity to our synagogue.

In terms of the running of the congregation, Susan Schwartz and the board and Jill Ziman bring steadiness and devotion to their positions. I can attest that board meetings are not like those of other congregations I have been part of. There is no yelling; no pounding of tables; no ultimatums given; no threats to resign. You could say

there is little drama at our board meetings and believe me, I'll take that any day compared to some of the histrionic scenes I've witnessed elsewhere.

Is everything hunky dory at TBT? Not by any means. There is much work to be done in the months ahead. For adults, we want to build on Herman Rosenbaum's wonderful Yiddish class and the splendid Torah Study group and expand opportunities for learning. This fall there will be a class about Genealogy and we also want this coming year to offer programs that address the concerns of the so-called sandwich generation, struggling to care for aging parents, while working and caring for our own children and ourselves.

For those who are looking for an alternative to our Shabbat Evening services, we will offer a monthly Shabbat morning service with some wonderful new elements. There will be more time for meditation and reflection. It will be less prayer driven and more inwardly directed. We are calling it Shabbat HaNefesh (the Sabbath of the Soul). Starting in November, this Shabbat morning service on the second Saturday of the month will bring a new and richer dimension to our worship at Temple Beth Torah.

As for adults in our community in their 20's and 30's who are not members of Temple, I have a message for you. Temple Beth Torah has lowered financial barriers to joining. In fact years ago, the board established gateway membership rates that take into account that young adults may lack financial capacity. These gateway membership rates serve as encouragement for membership and you can find out more information about them on our website.

*(Annual dues for single or couple under age 30 - \$36
Annual dues for single or single parent age 30 to 35 - \$90
Annual dues for married couple age 30 to 35 - \$180*

Maintenance fund and building fund contributions will be waived until age 35. Full tuition will be paid for children in religious school. Age for couples will be based on the elder of the two).

I hope this information is encouraging to those of you who may think it costs a fortune to be a member. But I will add, I am cognizant that it is not enough to promote these rates. Adults in their 20's and 30's need to see that there is a reason to belong to a congregation. People need to see a purpose for being part of a community. They want to know that they can make a difference. They want to feel a connection to others. They want to engage in meaning filled programs. Indeed, to engage adults of all ages requires purpose, personal connection, social justice; and meaningful opportunities for self-expression.

For us to enhance the vibrancy of Temple Beth Torah there is a vital need in our congregation for people of all ages to step up. It's more than the board, the staff, and those who have been volunteering for years can accomplish. It means a willingness to help plan and organize a Temple event. Perhaps you will do so through a Temple Committee or an Auxiliary. Maybe you have an idea of your own you want to see happen here. There are no significant barriers to creating new opportunities for

connection at TBT. When people give of their time and energy and creativity and resources great things happen. We would not have a remodeled sanctuary and social hall if it were not for the efforts of people who banded together in the beautification committee. We would not have a Legacy Program which successfully received 18 commitments last year and is determined to do so again if not for folks caring enough to devote their time and effort. We would not have a community garden or a remodeled kitchen or a wonderful website or a community Teen Midrasha without you, the members of Temple Beth Torah. So I encourage you all to be involved and contribute your energy and creativity. In addition, increase the vitality of our congregation by inviting your friends, whether Jewish or not, to participate in our programs and join in our celebrations.

Have we peaked as a congregation? Have we reached the pinnacle of life at Temple Beth Torah? In my opinion, not at all. We certainly have challenges. But I believe in the goodness of our members who share the same devotion that has sustained this synagogue for over five decades.

Let us be hopeful about the future. To be hopeful is an essential quality to living a life of purpose and meaning. Rabbi Yisrael Ruttman teaches:

“In Judaism, each calendar day begins with night. Every 24-hour period consists of a night followed by a day. In Jewish thought, nothing is accidental. God created the day to follow the night to teach us that there is always something good to look forward to, something to live for. No matter how bad the night, the sun always rises.”

On this morning of Yom Kippur, let us look to the coming year with Tikvah, with hope. Let us face our challenges in our congregation, our nation, and our world with realistic optimism. We are a people who are imbued with the prophetic spirit that there will come a day when nation shall not lift up sword against nation. We are a people who will forever work toward an age of peace. May we sanctify our lives through prayer and righteous acts. With hope, let us bring forth a world that is made better by our deeds.