

I sat at my computer and had barely moved from my office all day, mostly alone here in the synagogue. July 29 was on the early side of when I started to return to working in person at Temple Isaiah. Over the course of the day, I had met with our new president, Gary Perolman; conferenced with a staffer of the Jewish National Fund; discussed an aspiring Eagle Scout's project and ways that TI could support him; met with a wedding couple, bat mitzvah student, an upcoming conversion candidate and mentored a 5th-year rabbinical student. The only time I think I left my office was to film segments for our "Return to the Back Lawn Shabbat" video with Rachel and Rabbi Plotkin — a video that became irrelevant as soon as it was abundantly clear that we would instead welcome members back to Shabbat in the Parking Lot — all the best laid plans... Aside from the filming, the rest of these meetings took place on Zoom or conference calls. My eyes were essentially falling out of my head! I am sure that many of you can identify with the feeling — there's even a Yiddish phrase for it, "Ich bin azoy oysgeZoomed." Loosely, "I'm totally Zoomed out!"

It was 7:30pm when I had finished my meetings, and I faced a dilemma. My next engagement was at 8pm, and while I could make it home to my basement just in the nick of time, I decided to stay here at TI for that final event of my day. And, I decided to bring my laptop to the sanctuary, turn on only one light on the bimah, and sit down in front of the open ark to connect on Zoom. The evening of July 29, we entered Tisha B'Av — the day on the Jewish calendar that marks the destruction of the First and Second Temples, the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, France in 1306, Spain in 1492, even the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942. The Ninth day of the Month of Av is essentially the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, the day of calamity and rupture — a day marked by fasting, sitting on the ground, and reading the ancient scroll of Lamentations, Eicha, which relays the prophet Jeremiah's violent and harrowing eyewitness account of the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians.

If you have never heard of Tisha B'Av, don't feel bad. I'm pretty sure I had never heard of it until I was an 18-year-old songleader at Camp Harlam, and one of the young rabbis¹ on faculty insisted that we hold a Tisha B'Av service, and that I had to learn the songs. Fortunately enough, I already owned Don McLean's American Pie album, so I knew "By The Waters of Babylon!" I do remember that it caused a bit of a skirmish among the faculty, as some of the more classical Reform rabbis insisted that it was inconsistent with Reform values to hold this service, and why was this renegade rabbi trying to make everything so traditional?!? The history to that goes back to the earliest days of the Reform movement, when the first Reform rabbis rebelled against the notion of mourning the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, or praying for the re-establishment of the Third Temple in the time of the Messiah. One particular early reformer even went so far as to advocate that the synagogue should hold a party and a lavish banquet to celebrate Tisha B'Av, and what he saw as the spiritual progression that came from the destruction of the Jerusalem Temples!

While the provocative custom of the Tisha B'Av feast did not actually catch on, generations of Reform Jews had little exposure to this traditional fast day until relatively recently. It didn't make matters easier that Tisha B'Av necessarily falls in the middle of the summer, when many people's minds are on

1 I'm pretty sure that young rabbi was Rabbi Jamie Gibson, who retired this year!

the beach, vacations and summer camp, and not on synagogue programming. Well, until this year — when those things pretty much didn't exist!

Which is what found me sitting on the floor, right there, and logging into a Zoom Tisha B'Av commemoration as the sun had set over our temple, Temple Isaiah. Through the time I've been here at TI, there has been something to commemorate Tisha B'Av every year. Rachel Petroff Kessler has typically taken the lead, and Rabbi Plotkin or I have participated. More often than not, this date has coincided with my weeks on faculty at Camp Harlam, though I recall that when I've been present, the crowd for Tisha B'Av was generally 5–10 or so members of the congregation. Again, it is not the most widespread of Reform Jewish customs. Which is why I was surprised to log in to the Zoom and find nearly 30 screens present online. Who knew it would take a pandemic to make us so much more traditional?!?

The custom of sitting on the ground is connected to the practice of direct mourners at a shiva, sitting on low stools or even the bare floor by candlelight. The experience for me immediately brought me back to Tisha B'Av three years ago when my family travelled together in Israel and were staying in Jerusalem. Lev and I walked down to the Southern Wall area of the Kotel, gathering for the egalitarian reading of the scroll of Lamentations organized at the only spot in the ancient ruins of the Temple complex that allows for men and women praying together. There, on a clear night under the Jerusalem moon, we sat on the massive building stones that date back to the Second Temple, toppled in their same place, awaiting redemption these past two thousand years.

Maybe it was the experience of leaning up against the Jerusalem stone of our holy ark; maybe it was the feeling of isolation, being all alone inside of a space that I much prefer to share with community; and maybe it was the accumulated emotion of months of quarantine and anxiety, which at that point — as now — show no clear sign of coming to an end. The feeling was powerful as we began chanting prayers and studying the texts.

Rachel did a beautiful job, as always, chanting verses of Lamentations in the distinctive cadence of the traditional trope system reserved only for this day. But it was the set-up to the reading that caught me off-guard.

There is a debate in traditional practice for Tisha B'Av. When reading this scroll, which tells a tale of destruction and woe, how does one bless the reading? Normative practice has dictated that there is no blessing to be said over the reading.² The exception are communities that read Eicha from a handwritten kosher scroll, as we read Megillat Esther on Purim. And while the content of the blessing is not outlined, it likely is — as appeared in our book for Tisha B'Av — Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheyenu Melech HaOlam, Asher Kid'shanu BeMitzvotav VeTzivanu Al Mikra Megillah — "We praise You, O God, Sovereign of existence, who has hallowed our lives with commandments and commanded us to read this scroll."³ Really not the most evocative of blessings, but it makes the clear case — it's a mitzvah to read these words.

2 https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/05-10-15/#note2_05_10_19

3 as translated in *The Five Scrolls*, CCAR Press, 1984 - p. 262

However, I was struck this year, as never before, by a blessing that I hadn't recalled hearing or seeing at any prior Tisha B'Av service. The blessing on the materials Rachel had prepared, which we read together before Rachel began the chanting, reads as follows:

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech HaOlam, Asher Asanu Asirei-Tikvah.

“We praise You, O God, Sovereign of existence, who has made us captives of Hope.”⁴

The words formed in my mouth, but then pulled at my heart. It was all I could do not to burst out in tears. God... You have made us Asirei Tikvah, CAPTIVES OF HOPE.

Here. On the floor. Alone in the sanctuary. On Tisha B'Av, lamenting all of the destruction, the pain of Jewish existence. Feeling the ways in which millennia of suffering — of anti-Semitism, and intolerance, of Jewish in-fighting and sectarian animosity, of the forces within and without that continue to make this day relevant; Feeling the ways in which this particular Tisha B'Av — and by extension this particular Yom Kippur — leave me depleted and depressed, wounded and worried, torn and terrified... A nation in the midst of lockdown, fearful of a lethal enemy that is carried on invisible aerosols; A country torn asunder, reckoning with the opened flood-gates of our original sin of enslaving a people — and the continuing legacy of structural and entrenched racism, acknowledged or not; The polarized state of our nation which posits that “you are either with me, or you are against me — and if you are against me, I can only define that as the embodiment of evil”; The lingering effects of our local struggles swirling around school redistricting — and the friendships, relationships, and bonds of trust torn asunder in what feels now like an ancient memory, but which I know continues to be for many an open wound; A world that continues to isolate and attack in every arena the only consistently democratic nation in the Middle East, our homeland and our pride, The State of Israel; and a State of Israel that continues to be an imperfect, sometimes maddeningly so, version of the vision of the founders, whose belief in the sacredness of equality, the collective human family and the goodness of the Jewish ethical tradition was held with a secular messianic fervor that is hard to imagine in today's cynical world...

Yes, with all of that, God, You have made us *Asirei-Tikvah* CAPTIVES OF HOPE.

The phrase itself comes from the prophet Zecharia⁵, where it is part of a message that is directed at the prophet's fellow Jews returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile; those faithful minority who chose to leave the familiar, even comfortable world of Exile to return to the sacred Land, to rebuild the toppled walls of the First Temple. A message perhaps of encouragement and strength to a people so desperately in need of that vision.

4 translation *ibid*.

5 Zecharia 9:12 - of interest, but perhaps not for this sermon, is the choice of the editors of The Five Megillot to alter slightly the phrase “Asirei HaTikvah” by removing the specificity of Ha (The) - was it a conscious move to say that there is not only ONE hope? Was it to make the phrase more durable and general through the ages? Was it not conscious at all?

Aside from being emotionally enraptured by this phrase found in a blessing for a day focused on destruction and devastation, I also wanted to understand from a scholarly rabbinic point of view where the blessing came from. While blessings are occasionally composed out of whole cloth, they are typically based on some earlier tradition. The only place I could find this blessing was the volume Rachel had copied from, *The Five Scrolls*, published by our Reform movement in 1984.

As I mentioned, most normative practice is to chant from the scroll of Lamentations without a blessing, or only blessing when reading from a kosher scroll.⁶ I investigated, and my study brought me into conversations with trusted mentors similarly fascinated by this blessing⁷, but who had no definitive answers. I reached out to Rabbi Deborah Bronstein, the daughter of the remaining living co-author of the volume, 90-year-old Rabbi Herbert Bronstein. In conversation with her father, she reported back to me that his only message was that while “it doesn’t have a direct link to Tisha B’Av, it asserts that we must never give up hope.”⁸

It was not the fantastic story that I was looking for: for example — I imagined that the authors had discovered a manuscript by a Tunisian kabbalist who insisted that the power to unlock the heavens to the deepest of prayers would be enacted by reciting this specific prayer on Tisha B’Av in the year 2020! But it was something even deeper and more powerful: the eternal assertion that what it means to be a Jew is to be inextricably, irrevocably anchored to hope! A message for all times, and very definitely a message for our specific moment.

In the following weeks, I played with these words. I also should say that, initially, I had translated the phrase “Prisoners of Hope,” which is how nearly all of the non-Jewish Bible editions translate it. I even argued in a good-natured way with Gary Perolman, who countered that he preferred “Captives of Hope.” As with most translations, the very act of rendering the original Biblical Hebrew into another language is what the poet Bialek called “like kissing through a veil” — an act that is strangely relevant in our time of widespread mask-wearing!

Admittedly, though, the way that we translate the phrase matters mightily. If we are “Prisoners of Hope,” we might see the image as something quite negative. We have no choice. We are doomed to cling to hope, despite all of the compelling signs to the contrary. We are almost blinded by this sense that we refuse to see the world around us for what it is. A slight variation are the versions of the Bible that translate “prisoners, who still have hope.” While our state may be that of prisoner, it might not last forever. There could yet be deliverance from the dry pit we find ourselves in. We are prisoners, and yet we still have hope.

But I will now side with Gary. Living with the phrase rumbling around my heart and brain these last two months, I believe that “Captives of Hope” is the closest reflection of how I heard the phrase as we entered Tisha B’Av, and how I understand the blessing now, here at Yom Kippur. Reading the account of the destruction of Jerusalem, recalling the countless woes and indignities that have faced this people

6 Vilna Gaon and others

7 With a special thanks to Rabbi Bernard Mehlman

8 email communication 9/8/20

over the millennia; here, on this Sabbath of Sabbaths, as we face our souls, our sins, our failures and our frailty — there is still a life-affirming quality to these days when we deprive our bodies of food, drink and pleasure, as we rehearse for our ultimate demise. And in this year, when death has been an unwelcome, but frequent visitor; when fear is sustained and real, anxiety the order of the day; when injustices are laid out in stark contrasts and graphic videos; when our very bodies, souls and beliefs are on the line... How dare we hope right now? How. Dare. We. Hope. Right. Now? ... No, how dare we not???

I know that I am a captive of hope, that I am captivated by the vision of a world that lies around the corner, and that our very purpose in this life is to take a step or two, to help others come along the path, that gets us just a little closer — or even, in extraordinary moments, in years when it seems all is at the point of rupture, perhaps a good deal closer to the world of our hope-filled horizon.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: “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... against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, should be, but is not yet. There is no more challenging vocation...”⁹

And Rabbi Sacks draws this distinction: “Optimism is the belief that things are going to get better. Hope is the belief that we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope is an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but one does need courage to hope. Knowing what we do of our past, no Jew can be an optimist. But Jews have never — despite a history of sometimes awesome suffering — given up hope”¹⁰

Returning to the blessing composed for Tisha B’Av, it is really not so out of line with the basic assertion that, even in our darkest moments, even on the most repeatedly tragic date on the Hebrew calendar, we have held fast to the notion that we are, indeed, Captives of Hope. Some traditional sources go so far as to make the case that, in addition to being the day to mark the communal tragedies of this people, Tisha B’Av is also the projected birthday of the Mashiach, the messiah.¹¹ The beautiful part of that story is that — whatever we may or may not believe about the coming of the messiah — the midrash here posits a DATE to the Mashiach’s birth, but not a year! In other words, which Tisha B’Av? It could be any one, maybe even the next one, or the one that has just passed two months ago.

I invite you to join with me — right here and now — in the time-worn, ever-fresh characterization of the Jewish soul. In spite of all we have faced in our history; in defiance of all we have experienced this past, terrible year; in solidarity with those of every race, belief, and nationality who have suffered mightily and refused to give up hope, but rather bound themselves to the vision of being Asirei Tikvah; to affirm, Baruch Atah Adonai — Yes, You are praised, Adonai, for you have made us Asirei Tikvah, Captives of Hope.

9 <https://rabbisacks.org/future-tense-how-the-jews-invented-hope-published-in-the-jewish-chronicle/>

10 The Dignity of Difference, p. 206 - and <https://rabbisacks.org/topics/hope-vrs-optimism/>

11 Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachot 2:4; Eichah Rabbah 1:51

I cannot tell you when this time of darkness will end; and I cannot promise that healing will come easily to this people, this nation's wounds of spirit and body and soul — in fact, any realist will conclude that the road to that place will be long and difficult. But I can tell you that I believe with every fiber of my being that light will yet shine through; that we will once again embrace and kiss, touch and sing, fill this room with our breath and our prayer and gather as one.

As this morning's haftarah from the prophet Isaiah envisioned:

“Then our light will burst through like the dawn;
When we need healing it will spring up quickly;
Our own righteousness will march ahead to guard us.
And a radiance from Adonai will reach out behind to guard us.
When we cry out, Adonai will answer;
When we call, God will say: “Hineini — Here I am!”¹²

Hineini — Here I am. Hineinu — Here we are. We Asirei Tikvah, we Captives of Hope, lifting up our prayers, our offerings, our need, our distress, our exhaustion, our gratitude, our hope to You on this Yom Kippur day. May You usher in a better year. A year of blessing. A year of healing. A year of health. A year of hope.

L'Shanah Tovah — from me and my family to you and yours, I wish you a Good, Sweet and Healthy 5781!

¹² Isaiah 58:8-9, my translation has shifted the tense to first person plural from second person for effect.