

L'shanah Tovah/Happy New Year! During this month of Elul, as I prepared for Rosh Hashanah I realized that I have had more discussions about hopelessness, discouragement, giving up, fear, and/or sadness than I have had at any other time in my rabbinate including after 9/11. Many of you have spent your life working for equality, justice, peace, and/or protecting our environment. You have seen your life work at best threatened, at worse gains lost. You have wondered, "What you worked for? Why try? What good have you done?" I wish I could say that your fears were unwarranted. The truth is the world is a scary place right now. Hate crimes are on the rise rather than decreasing. Anti-Semitism in particular is on the rise not only nationally, but here locally as well. The US withdrew from the Paris Climate agreement. Carbon dioxide emissions rose in the United States and the amount of student debt grew by \$47 billion. Our children are not receiving enough mental health support. Our students are afraid to go to school. Partisan politics is the norm. And very few people anywhere choose to discuss politics with people with whom they vehemently disagree. Now I want to be clear. RH and YK are not about everything they are doing wrong. RH and YK are all about every time **I** missed the mark; **my** mistakes; **my** challenges; **my** strengths I have to build on.

Years ago I gave a sermon about how people who grow up in the worst of circumstances—war, abuse, extreme poverty, gangs, sexual slavery—can transform themselves into healthy, productive, contributing members of society. At the time, the research suggested that a person needed two things. One was one person at some point in his/her life for even a brief moment who truly believed that person could transform his/her life; one cheerleader who gave him/her tools, showed him/her alternative life styles and gave hope that life can improve. The other was that every person had to believe for him/herself that life could get better; s/he had to have hope.

So my question for us is, “Who are our cheerleaders? What and or who gives us hope?”

This year I have been learning about a third reason to continue working to improve our world and that is so that we do not become changed for the worse. There is a folk tale that is attributed to the Chafetz Chaim, a great rabbi of the 1800s, or an unknown monk dating 1100, or Aldous Huxley, a British writer of 1894. I heard it as a Jewish folktale. Like all good folktales, it has been passed around and shared by many different cultures. The story as I learned it goes like this: I set out to change the world, but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only try to influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there too. So I targeted the community in my hometown of Radin, but achieved no greater success. Then I gave all my effort to changing my own family, and failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself, and that’s how I had such an impact on the Jewish world.” There are very few rabbis of the 1800s who had a greater impact on the Ashkenazi world than Chafetz Chaim, all by trying to change himself.

So how are we going to change ourselves this year? Am I going to tell the teacher when a friend is bullied? Will I let my parents, teachers, rabbi know when I am bullied, regardless of the stigma attached to telling? Am I going to get a friend help before it is too late? Will I organize my synagogue to clean up the nearest park? Are we going to use our political wisdom to mentor someone just starting out? Is writing letters, and targeted financial donations our method of influencing change? Am I going to volunteer working for a cause I believe in? Will I walk my talk at work and implement changes in how we protect the environment and create a safe and just work place? Does my family need to learn more respectful ways of interacting with each other? Am I going to work for legislation that will protect my undocumented neighbor?

What am I going to do this year that will have the greatest impact on the world and, if not the world writ large, at least me?

RH and YK are not the times to say it is someone else's turn to fight the good fight. I am all fought out. RH and YK are not the time to list every real time-consuming thing on our plate, giving excuses for why we do not live out our values. RH and YK are not the time to throw up our hands and give up because we might fail. To be honest, 2018 and 2019 will need all hands on deck. There is no room for sitting this one out. Each of us has a role to play. What role we choose to play is ours to determine. And now is the time each of us is given to start figuring it out.

The truth is that I agree with Margaret Mead when she said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." In November 2016, I shared with you a picture book written by Rabbi Sandy Sasso. As many of you know, I truly believe that most good picture books are written for adults as well as children. For those who have not yet been introduced to the world of Chelm, Chelm is a place in the Jewish community's imagination where people do the weirdest, bizarre things. As Rabbi Sasso wrote, Chelm is a place where "if something could go wrong, it did. The roofs of the houses always leaked. The sidewalks were cracked. The gardens grew only weeds. Nothing was ever right. Some people said 'Luck comes and goes.' But in Chelm's case it never came; it only went. Other's said, 'There is no such thing as luck.'" In fact, in the Chelm stories, many readers spend about 2/3 of the story laughing at the Chelm resident's lack of reality, bad luck, and incomprehensible choices. All of which leads us to the punch line which is, of course, the wisest lesson of all, much like the joker in Shakespeare's plays.

Anyway, in Rabbi's Sasso's version of this Chelm story, entitled Butterflies under Our Hat, the people of Chelm were certain that luck was real and somewhere/somehow they had lost it. They looked everywhere-in beds, in basements, in pant pockets, in pickle barrels, in water wells, and in wicker baskets. But as luck would have it, they never found any. So they gave up. They stopped building houses, delayed repairing sidewalks, and quit planting gardens. After all, why work to make the world a better place if you do not have any hope that it would get better?

Then one day, a strange and beautiful woman came to town. No one had ever seen her before. She wore a large purple felt hat over her red hair and a long green dress that matched her eyes. She told the people of Chelm that there was something better than luck. Better than luck? The people weren't sure they believed her, but they listened anyway. Having lost their luck, what else did they have to lose? "Tomorrow at daybreak," the strange woman informed the town, "butterflies of hope are going to fly into the town square. If you can manage to cover the butterflies with your hats, you will have hope and hope is better than luck." Some of the town people thought the woman was crazy. Nothing was better than luck. But others were not so sure.

The next morning, just as the sun began to rise, the people of Chelm who could not find any luck, went into the town square to look for hope. Clouds of colorful butterflies appeared. They landed on the ground. For a few moments they just sat there; their wings fluttered softly. The people were very quiet. They gently placed their hats over the butterflies. We have it! Now we have hope - as if hope is something one catches and can keep in one's backyard or back pocket.

Just at that moment, it began to rain. The drizzle became a downpour. Everyone desperately needed their hats. One by one they took their hats and placed them on their heads.

One by one the butterflies disappeared. As the people watched the butterflies disappear, they said, “We not only do not have luck, but we have also lost hope.” At that moment, the red haired, green-eyed women appeared again. “Look under your hats,” she whispered. The people were puzzled. They had seen everything they had worked for disappear. Some of their hardest won gains lost. Overnight it seemed as if everything was gone.

The people slowly looked under their hats. They could hardly believe it. The butterflies had gone, but they had left a trace...something...a fine, faint powder. They saw it-the trace of the vanished butterflies. And that was all we need-hope. The people of Chelm started building houses, repairing sidewalks, and planting gardens. If only those were our worse challenges.

Where does our trace of hope come from? How can we strengthen our resolve, our ability to work against all odds to give to the next generation a better world than we inherited?

Of course, doing the right thing alone is scary and sometimes lonely or at least we think it will be lonely before we start. Shmuel Yosef Agnon was an Israeli writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966. He told a story about a man who had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing what the right way out of the forest was. I imagine as each hour passed, he got more and more frightened. He started to pay more and more attention to his job security, which of his neighbors and friends he could trust. Agnon wrote that after many days, he finally saw someone approaching him. His heart was filled with anticipation. “Now I will learn the right way out of this nightmare.” When they neared one another, he asked, “Please, tell me which the right way out of this forest? I have been wandering about for several days.” Said the other to him, “I do not know the way out either, for I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But this I can tell you: do not take the way I have been going, for that will lead you astray. We have so much to learn from each other’s experiences - best

practices, and biggest challenges. Why not pull our collective experience to learn from and with each other?" This new friend turned and said, "Now let us look for a new way together." Let us find a new way together. Let us be each other's cheerleaders, each other's beacon of hope. We might not change the world. For that matter, according to Rabbi Tarfon in Pirke Avot, it is not our job to finish perfecting the world. It is not our job to make the world perfect. Even if we could, it would not be for us to do. Rabbi Tarfon does not stop there. He continues, "Nor are we free to desist from it either. We are not left off the hook from working to make it better just because the journey is not a straight line to victory. We are not allowed to give up just because things are difficult." So I ask you again, "What are you going to do? What am I going to do? What are the traces of hope we are going to leave behind for the next generation to find when life gets hard for them?" After all, isn't that what Rh and YK is truly about - finding the traces of hope that will carry us through the difficult times to next year; connecting us to the community that will be here to support and guide us; and reminding us that the world can be better and most important, it is up to us to make it better. And so I ask you again, "How am I going to change myself this year? Am I going to tell the teacher when a friend is bullied? Will I let my parents, teachers, rabbi know when I am bullied, regardless of the reason why? Am I going to get a friend help before it is too late? Will I organize OMI to put solar panels on our roof? Are we going to use our political wisdom to mentor someone just starting out? Is writing letters, and targeted donations our method of influencing change? Am I going to volunteer working for a cause I believe in? Will I walk my talk at work and implement changes in how we protect our planet and create a safe just work environment? Does my family need to learn more respectful ways of interacting with each other? Can I reach out to my neighbor with whom I never talk politics and practice the art of sacred arguing? Will I accompany an undocumented neighbor to

court or serve as a witness to ICE's behavior in Maryland? What am I going to do this year that will have the greatest impact on the world? And who am I going to do it with?"

We often think of RH as the New Year of the world—a holy day that celebrates the gift of time and place. The time is another year. The place is here on earth, in the United States, in the state of Maryland, at Columbia Jewish congregation, in my seat today. What am I going to do with my gift of time in this place?

My hope and prayer for us as individuals and as a community is that we remind ourselves of the hope embedded in Judaism that has transcended other scary times, outlived other oppressive circumstances and empowered Jew after Jew to leave the world more just, healthier, filled with peace and respect. We are part of that Jewish chain of hope. It is under our hat or kippah if only we choose to look for it. It brings us to a minyan of travelers who share similar beliefs, have learned from different experiences and can teach each other so much about this new path we are walking down together. If only I will make the most of this Rosh Hashanah to change myself. I am up to the challenge. Are you?

If you are able please rise as we return the Torah to the ark on pp. 598.