

We are living through challenging times. Time and time again, the reality unfolding around us causes me to ask myself what my role is, as a rabbi. Should I ignore pressing human rights issues, and all the accompanying political realities? Ought I limit myself to speaking exclusively about abstract spiritual matters, meditation and kabbalah? I tell myself that people need a break, a distraction from the relentless daily horror story that American politics has become. But you choose this synagogue over a pub or a movie. So, I conclude that I'd be failing you were I not to address our current reality, and bring to bear what our tradition has to offer. But isn't a rabbi's job to offer comfort too, a message of hope for the future?

I rather wish I could offer that. I used to be a big fan of hope. I no longer am.

I never thought I would be part of the generation that would witness what we witness today. With our government pulling out of the Paris accord, and the EPA revoking nature protection laws and overturning executive orders from the previous administration, while cutting its own budget by one-third, we may have already lost the battle to save our environment, and ultimately our planet. Our economy is only getting better for the very few at the top. The model of capitalism that aimed to strengthen the middle class just decades ago is in a death knell. The proliferation of robots and automation is increasingly pushing people out of work. Warehouses are being automated, your orthopedic surgeon is being replaced by a robot and soon, your UPS driver will be replaced by a drone. We have been in a state of perpetual war for 16 years with no end in sight. We are closing in on ourselves, imposing travel bans against Muslim countries when their refugees need asylum the most. To us Jews, this looks awfully similar to the US policies barring Jewish refugees from entering this country in the 30's and 40's which, of course, resulted in the loss of thousands of Jewish lives. The very election of our current president is a direct expression of the racism still alive and well in white America. Black men, women and children murdered by police officers can't find justice. We are seeing, as in Alabama for example, a candidate for the US senate *winning* on a platform that *overtly* promotes bigotry, racism, homophobia and white supremacy. To those of us who studied the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe in the early decades of the 20th century that culminated with Nazism, this is a chilling déjà-vu. With anti-Semitism and racism on the rise, it is clear that we do not learn from the lessons of history, and we are in danger of, once again, clinging to the paralyzing false hope that, soon, things will go back to some imagined idyllic "way they were."

As a young man, growing up in France hearing about deportations and murders of family members, and reading books about the Shoah, I could not make sense of why, overwhelmingly, we allowed ourselves to be dehumanized, then sent to languish in ghettos, and ultimately went along to the gas chambers without resisting? My inability to understand this, played a large part in my moving to Israel and serving in its army: I thought, now we could live independent in our land, no longer at the

mercy of others—our fate in our own hands, able to fight back. Even so, my unanswered question still remained.

Until two years ago. Two years ago, in preparation for our trip to Poland, I read a book entitled Treblinka, the extermination camp that was one of our planned stops. In this challenging book the author, Jean-Francois Steiner, makes the following powerful case for what he sees as the main reason that allowed the Nazis to murder 6 million of our people.

Countless times, in the 2000-year of our diaspora, we have faced mass killings, forced conversions, expulsions, and pogroms. Whatever came our way, we survived. In the meantime, the empires, kingdoms, and nations among which we lived and which turned against us, all faded into the sands of history. To most of us, then—Steiner argues—the Nazis were just the newest evil in an age-old story. We, surely, would survive them too. What we didn't know, didn't see, or couldn't imagine, was that the Nazi plan was on a scale never before seen: that of complete genocide. Steiner claims that the Nazis understood our hardwired instinct for survival instilled in us by two thousand years of persecution. Given that knowledge, they figured out our weakness—the quintessential trait that could be used against us to facilitate the extermination of our people with the least amount of resistance.

So, what is it? This fatal flaw that hastened our demise? Can you guess? In a word, it was HOPE. The fact is that Jews are a hopeful people. How could we not be after surviving so many oppressive rulers? The Nazis played this “hope” card terrifyingly well against us. Every step of the way to the gas chambers, from ghettoization to relocation, from work camp to death camp, each time they gave us *hope* that the next stop would be better. Even when we arrived in the smothering cattle cars at the gate of Treblinka (the moment when, statistically, one's life-expectancy was two hours), the Nazis had staged the platform as a fake train station in an idyllic Polish village including a fake clock with painted hands. Before being supposedly assigned new living quarters, we were led down a gravel path lined with trees heading for the “showers” building, with a large painted star of David above its door. Hope until the very end.

Because we hoped, we didn't revolt. The too few exceptions were when we got wind of the final liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, in Auschwitz, Sobibor or in Treblinka, when the *sonderkommandos* of the camps learned that they were the next in line for the gas chambers. In every case, once all hope was lost, Jews were able to take action, to take their fates into their own hands, take up arms, and fight. Letting go of hope freed them to act.

To have hope is to believe in something. To believe in something means having a story to believe in, built around hope. Collapsed in our beliefs, our stories, our hopes, we are no longer free. Mystics tell us: “True spirituality is the end of belief.” Hebrew seems to agree. The word mistranslated as “belief” in Hebrew, is “*emunah*,” from the root that gives us the word, “amen – it is so.” *Emunah* is “it-is-so-ness;” not belief. *Emunah* is the ability to be present with “what is,” the “it-is-so-ness” of the moment. Not lost in stories, beliefs or hopes, but here, now, facing reality and truth. Understood this way, “*Emunah*” is a pathway toward waking up.

Perhaps, therefore, my role as a rabbi is to facilitate a practice of true *emunah*, whereby we learn to face the bare truth of reality as it is, together as a community, supporting each other in this shared process. If the current truth is bright, it is bright. If the current truth is dark, it is dark. Amen. No hope, no belief, no distraction. The naked truth of “what is.” Truth: we have lost planet earth. Truth: we have lost the middle-class economy. Truth: We have lost our democracy to big money. Truth: We live in a deeply racially divided country, where white supremacy yields great power. Truth.

What if we let go of hope and began to do the hard work of mourning what’s been lost, and act from there? This isn’t easy. But if I am to stay true to the spiritual teachings of our tradition, then I have no choice but to invite you, to invite all of us into this process of mourning, where we, as a community, can finally let go of the world as it was, as we might still wish it to be, when in fact that world is gone.

And then what? Ta-Nehisi Coates was interviewed on NPR about a piece he wrote in [The Atlantic](#) earlier this month titled “The First White President.” A masterful Op-Ed article on Trump and the deeply racist nature of our country. Toward the end of the interview Rachel Martin, of NPR, asked him: “You’ve outlined a situation in which there doesn’t seem to be any saviors, no existing party or movement that gets us out of this situation; to rescue us from this racial divide that seems to be deepening. That is a sad indictment!” Now, notice the *hope* in Martin’s following questions: “Where do you—because it is human nature to try to look for some kind of light—where do you see the light? Where do you see a moment or a way out?” Coates answered: “I don’t think I do.... I think the expectation that some moment will happen now [when 400 years of history is weighing down on us] is a bit naïve.” Martin, still seeking some trace of hope from him, continues: “How do you raise kids in that?... When the present and the future is that bleak.” And here was his “hopeless” answer: “I think quite easily. Life is always a problem. The fact that I am saying that I don’t see hope does not relieve people, does not relieve my son, does not relieve children of their responsibility to struggle. Folks struggled in bleaker times than this. So, to me, the answer is: during bleak times, we struggle.”

“*Atem nitzavim HaYom Kulchem!* All of you are standing here today!” This injunction from an ancient time addresses us today. Today, *we* are reminded that taking a stand is what we do. The Torah says: “Each person in Israel.” Men, women, children, even those of you not yet part of Israel but part of our community. We, all of us, have to live up to our name: Israel – Divine Wrestlers, Divine Strugglers. The Torah is reminding us all, in the name of an ancient covenant, of which we are a part, to embrace our current struggle not because of a hoped-for future, but because of a real, harsh, and bleak present that requires, that *needs* our hopeless energies in order to struggle through it. Hope weighs us down. Hope cripples. Letting hope go allows us to do what needs to be done.

Listening to Coates, I was reminded of the famous quote from from *Pirkei Avot*: “*Lo aleicha ha-m'lachah lig'mor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'ibatel mimenah* – it is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from doing your part.” Our part in this world is to accept and unreservedly engage with the struggle. We say “*liShma-* for its own sake,” because this is what being with “what is” is calling us to do here, and now. Just because.

L'Shanah Tovah, g'mar chatimah tovah. To a year devoid of hope—and filled with right action.