

That said, while optimism is a matter of personality or disposition, hope is a matter of faith.

Perhaps that is why hope is often expressed during times of communal worship, especially when we're facing hardship. During last year's High Holy Days we may have turned our hearts to the Wall in Jerusalem, but many an attention wandered in the direction of Wall Street, wondering what would become of earnings, savings, pensions, jobs. At Sukkot, as our tradition encouraged us to think about living in temporary shelters, many around the world worried about keeping roofs over their heads.



What are the origins of the Hebrew word for hope, *tikvah*? One tradition suggests a link to the word *kav*, meaning cord. In the second chapter of the Book of Joshua, a Jericho prostitute named Rahab offers shelter to the Hebrew spies, and as a reward, she is instructed to hang a scarlet cord from her window so that when the Israelites come through, her home will be left unscathed. The term for the red thread, *tikvat hashani*, uses the same word, *tikvah*, hope.

This idea of hope as a cord was also suggested by Moses Haim Luzzatto, the 18th-century Italian Jewish mystic and poet, who likened hope to a line capable of spanning to the upper reaches of heaven, indeed to God.

The Reform Jewish theologian Eugene Borowitz points to another dimension of hope when he notes in his essay, "Hope Jewish and Hope Secular," that in the Bible, *k-v-h* refers not just to a state of soul, but an expectation of time.

According to Borowitz, the only mention of this *k-v-h* root in the Pentateuch is found in the Book of Genesis (49.18), translated (in the JPS edition) as "I wait for Your deliverance, O Lord." To hope is to close the gap between our present condition and a more desirable one in the future.

Linking Luzzatto's formulation to Borowitz's, one can imagine hope as taking hold of the cord, be it ever so flimsy, and using it as a bridge to a future still unrealized. If all you do is fantasize about a happy ending, then it's not hope in the above sense, but wishful

thinking. Hope is a thread, however elusive, that links us to a *possible future*. It demands that we take hold of it; otherwise, it is just a loose thread.



The Prophet Jeremiah offers yet another perspective on hope in his description of God as *Mikveh Yisrael*, which is usually translated as The Hope of Israel (14.8, 17.13). The sages linked this word to the identical term *mikveh*, meaning sacred pool or bath. Playing on the dual meaning, Rabbi Akiva commented: "Just as a *mikveh* purifies the impure, so does the Holy One of Blessing purify Israel."

Hope, then, is not only a cord that reaches back to us from a future still unrealized; it is also a comforting pool providing solace, purification, and regeneration. Think of the times when we face adversity—grave illness, economic setbacks, personal uncertainty. Holding onto a rope is not enough. We also need to be immersed in love, support, and friendship. Just as hope can inspire and enlighten, it can also warm and soothe. Our families and friends, colleagues and neighbors can constitute a huge reservoir of hope.

But what happens when hope is nowhere to be found, when it may seem as nothing more than delusion? In a highly suggestive passage, Job says:

*For a tree there is hope, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again and that its tender shoots will not cease. / Even though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the dust, / Yet at the first whiff of water it may flourish again and put forth branches like a young plant. / But when a man dies, all vigor leaves him; when man expires, where then is he? / As when the waters of a lake fail, or a stream grows dry and parches, / So men lie down and rise not again. Till the heavens are no more, they shall not awake, nor be roused out of their sleep. (Job 14.12-17)*

True, as mortals we have no hope of physical regeneration. That is why in Jewish tradition hope takes us beyond ourselves, placing us in a communal context. It is precisely this consolation

that is offered by the people Israel. While I may not live to see a withered stump renewed, I know that as one ring on the tree of life that is the Jewish people, I am part of something much greater than myself.

Identity and belonging have a crucial role to play here, for they help us to see that even if our own situation seems desperate, we are part of a larger organism which may yet grow again and flourish. "Hope," wrote Luzzatto, "is the very start of creation."



How, then, is a Jew to respond to the complex business of living in our post-9/11, post-economic meltdown world? One way is to remember what Barack Obama declared on election night in his acceptance speech: "While we breathe, we hope."

As we breathe, I suggest we search for tangible, incremental acts of reaffirmation and hope that can be found within the realms of family and community. Let us be part of initiatives for good. Let us be open to new encounters with people inside and outside our circle of acquaintance, if only to remind ourselves how much good there is in humanity. Let us remember that the alternative to hope is either despair or absolute certainty, and neither of them will get us to the possible future awaiting all of us just out of view. Let us seek out the thread and take hold of it.

As I write these words, hope for a meaningful breakthrough in the Middle East conflict seems very distant. Hope that the world's economies will soon strengthen is unlikely, as is hope that the developing world will receive the support and attention it needs. Nor is it easy to hope that the people we love who are gravely ill or deeply troubled will find comfort. But just when the temptation to despair seems overpowering, a glimmer of hope emerges: a hug, a word spoken in love, an object of beauty, an act of kindness.

There is a thin line between hope and delusion, between hope and self-distracted. In that thin line is the very thread I seek, my hope suspended precariously between a slab of margarine and a serving of schmaltz herring. □