

Hold On To Hope
2nd Day Rosh HaShanah, 5779

Just this past July, a man named Shawn Williams was set free from prison after being wrongfully imprisoned for 25 years for a crime he did not commit. I listened, two days after his release, to an hour-long interview with him. And while he expressed joy and relief at being released, and a genuine gratitude for everyone who had helped him, hearing about the how he was likely framed for murder and had lost decades of his life because our system of justice failed him utterly crushed me. I cried listening to his story, thinking about how many things should have saved him, and yet hadn't until now. But Shawn Williams? Over and over again he recalled how hope had kept him alive and moving forward and led him to freedom.

And there is hope for your future —declares the LORD... (Jeremiah 31:17)

I have been thinking a lot about hope these days. I will be honest, there are days when having hope seems like a luxury I cannot always afford. On my worst days, I have moments when I feel hopeless. I lose hope over the small things, over my work, my own personal goals, my visions for myself and my family that I haven't yet made into realities. I lose hope, and sleep, over the bigger things too. I despair when I read about laws and policies that discriminate against people for

their race, sex, gender identity, religion, immigration status, age, abilities, and simply who they choose to be and love in this world. I cry when I read about senseless violence, tragedies whose main cause was a gun in the hands of someone who should never have been granted access to one. I tear out my hair and yell into the void, “How can this be?! How can the world be getting worse?” And I look at my children, who are too young to know or to understand, and I see the hope and joy in their eyes every day and I wonder what I can possibly do to kindle that hope, to keep it vibrant and alive.

The prophet Jeremiah, whose words we just read in the Hafatarah today, tells us, as we start the new year, to have hope. “And there is hope in your future,” he claims. This is the same Jeremiah who wrote many of our haftarot of admonition that lead up to Tisha B’Av, the most heart-rending day on the Jewish calendar. This is the same Jeremiah who watched Jerusalem fall and the Temple of Solomon be destroyed. This is the same Jeremiah who was forced to look on as a generation of Jewish leaders were destroyed and the Jewish people floundered and failed while living exiled in Babylonia, who looked on pained by the eroding of the basic care and compassion with which Torah teaches us to treat others.

And yet, living amongst a total and complete upheaval of all goodness and security in his world, the prophet declares to us that there is hope for the future. How can this be so? It sounds odd or implausible for one such as him to hold onto hope when the world around him seems to grow darker daily. Indeed for many of us, we look around our world and see daily reminders that things are not as they should be. We are reminded in each cruel action that the vision of goodness and love, care and compassion, honor and justice, freedom and wonder for which we have been taught to strive by our Tradition is not being fulfilled.

Amidst all of those painful thoughts and realizations, however, I have been feeling, more and more each day, a growing hope that things are, and will continue to improve. When I have those moments of pain and doubt, when I feel my own hope in the world and our future waning, when I feel like Jeremiah might just be deluded, I think about those people like him who lived through times of unthinkable struggle and somehow came out the other side.

I don't think it is too much of a stretch to say that we have all had moments that made us feel like the world was incapable of improvement, like life had reached a low point. People regularly tell me that I come off as a happy person, that I am cheerful and outgoing, but that is only because I have the privilege to

wake up each morning and be allowed to help other people. For me, it is the single greatest source of hope and inspiration.

A little over a decade ago, in Providence, RI, a man stood up before an assembled crowd of thousands and tried to explain his vision, his desires, for our world. In answer to this question of how one can keep hoping, even when it seems naive, he said:

There aren't a lot of romantics here. See, the critics and the cynics don't understand what hope is. Hope is not blind optimism. Hope is not the ignorance of the challenges that stand between you and your dreams. Hope is exactly the opposite. Hope is believing and then fighting for things...Here's what I also know: that nothing worthwhile in this country has ever happened, except when somebody somewhere was willing to hope."

The speaker was trying to explain what he believed our communities, our countries and our world could be. He tried to help people understand how his own beliefs gave him hope for the future and helped him turn away from despair. Though then Senator Barack Obama spoke those words only a decade ago while on the campaign trail, they seem to burst out of memory as though from a lifetime ago, one in which hope did not seem like such a distant dream. But if the source of hope is believing, then we need to ask ourselves what do we believe if we ever want to restore our hope and faith in the future.

What do you believe? I'm not talking about God or the nature of reality in a philosophical way. I want you to ask yourself what you believe about our world, our country, our community, our families, ourselves.

Yesterday and then again today, we read the words *V'chol Ma'aminim*, "we all believe," during the musaf repetition of the Amidah. We sing them out, declaring centuries old beliefs about the nature of God and our world. We proclaim articles of faith, things like "We all believe that God is the Ruler of the world, guiding each generation with kindness," or "We all believe that the gate is open for those who seek repentance." For some, they may be a source of comfort and strength; for many more, they may be a challenge. But this year, I read the lengthy list and cannot help but ask myself, "In what do I believe?" If I were scrawling out my heart's most deeply held beliefs to pass on after this life, what would I want my children and the generations that come after me to know I stood for?

I believe that people are fundamentally good, and that collectively, we want the world to thrive.

I believe that my children are the most perfect and precious beings ever created, and simultaneously, so are each of your children.

I believe, completely and fully, that most of the movies made between 1982 and 1989 were completely awful and also that I will continue to watch them and enjoy them as often as I can for the rest of my life.

I believe that conquering fear is our most powerful way to grow into the people we have always wanted to become.

I believe that every tragedy inflicted upon a human being becomes a scar that wounds us all.

I believe that each of us will be hurt at times, and each of us will cause hurt, but that both working for and granting forgiveness can make us better, stronger, more compassionate people.

I believe that forgiving is not the same as excusing someone else's mistakes, but is an act of self-preservation, granting ourselves permission to let go of our anger and actually live a life of blessing instead of a life of malice.

I believe that the world is better and more full of goodness and light with you, each of you, living in it.

I believe that every moment of our lives contains within it the possibility for sacred wonder.

I believe that showing others compassion is never the wrong choice, even if we get hurt in the process.

I believe that our words have unbelievable power to hurt and destroy and tear us apart, or to show one another love and respect and save our lives.

I believe that that some things are objectively factual, others are patently false, and that one cannot change the one into the other by force of will or by shutting our eyes to what is real, or by using our own power and privilege to deceive others.

I believe that putting up walls does less to keep us safe, and much more to keep us apart.

I believe that a more perfect union is one in which every single voice is raised up and heard and honored as a reflection of the Divine.

I believe that until we really listen to someone else's story and their pain, we cannot understand them and we will always treat them as something "other" than our brothers and sisters.

I believe in every single person's rights to live openly exactly who they are while being loved and respected.

I believe that no one should be forcibly separated from the people they love. Period.

I believe that when one person works to make the world a better place, and has faith that they can, eventually they will.

I believe that no problem is unsolvable, that the world can always improve, and that though the arc of history is long, it bends toward justice.

I believe that this community is on a path to grow and prosper and connect people to one another in fantastic new ways that will make us a center of spiritual growth and interpersonal connection for years to come.

I believe that knowing each one of you enriches my life every day, and that the more I get to know about you, your life, your family, your passions, your hurts, and your dreams, the better my world becomes.

I believe in you. I believe that you can be everything you ever dreamed you could, that this year is exactly the right time to resolve to live life on purpose everyday.

You are the only one who knows what you believe, but do you ever acknowledge or pay heed to those beliefs? What you believe may not at all be what I believe, and I want you to know that I love and respect you no matter what you believe. But I ask that you be honest with yourself about what you really believe, and more than that, let those beliefs about what our world could be restore your hope. Let them fill you up so that you want more than anything to make our world a better place. Make up with a friend or loved one. Break your habits and do the things you know you should. Volunteer wherever you can do some good. Take a stand. Plant a tree. Call a politician and tell them how you want them to represent you. VOTE. Advocate for yourself and for others who don't have the strength to do so. Listen to someone who needs your help. Find the things that you feel passionately about and use that belief to create the resolve to act. Because if all it takes to get things done is to have hope and get moving, then I believe that each of you are ready, right now, to start getting to work.

Shanah tova.