Rabbi Chai Levy, Congregation Netivot Shalom

Kol Nidre 5782/2021, Holding on to Hope

I offer my gratitude to my teacher, Dr. Melila Hellner-Eshed for her teachings on hope and the poetry of Zelda through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and the Hartman Institute that inspired this drasha.

I’ve had more than a few conversations with some of you in recent months

About fear and uncertainty,

about our struggles with despair and hope,

and about the emotional toll of the pandemic, the climate crisis,

the daily news cycle and threats to our democracy,

plus all of the accompanying personal losses

that have filled us with grief for a world that will never be the same and

with anxiety about a future filled with unknowns.

Some days I, myself, have a hard time answering the question,

“Rabbi, how do we have hope with all of this uncertainty?”

But tonight,I’m going to take a stab at answering it.

Rebbe Nachman of Brastlav was famous for his habit of shouting,

“Do not despair! Gevalt! yidden, Zeit sich nisht meyaesh! Do not despair!”

But really, how do we not despair when there is so much broken in this world?

Every day during the season of teshuva, we recite Psalm 27, which concludes: *Kaveh El Adonai, Hazek V’ya’ametz libecha v’kaveh el Adonai.*

Hope in God, make your heart strong and courageous and hope in God.

What does it mean to hope in a way that’s not naïve,

not in denial of the real issues of our world?

What is hope that’s both grounded in reality and

in our Jewish tradition’s understanding of hope?

As you know, we have been through times of utter devastation before.

on Tisha B’av, we sit in darkness, on the floor like mourners,

and chant Eicha, our book of Lamentations.

It bewails the horrors of the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.

Yet, the author, who according to tradition is the prophet Jeremiah,

Amid all of the devastation and anguish, through his tears,

Manages to muster up an expression of hope.

Right in the middle of Eicha, he says *Ulai Yesh Tikvah* (3:29)

“Maybe there is hope.”

In the middle of lamenting tragedy, each of these three small words carries tremendous power for our Jewish orientation to our world of loss and

Are a stunning expression - of possibility – *Ulai*,

of positivity – *yesh*,

And of hope- *Tikvah.*

Even in the darkest depths of destruction, there is possibility

And hope for what might lie ahead.

I want to explore with you this word, Tikvah, hope, as it appears in our tradition, to unpack what it means and how it might guide us in these uncertain times.

The root of the word Tikvah, hope, is Kavah, kuf-vav-hey,

and it seems to have its origins in several ancient near eastern languages[[1]](#endnote-1)

with the meaning of a rope, a thread, a cord.

In modern Hebrew, a Kav is also a cord, a line, a string.

So, hope, Tikvah, has at its root, Kav, the sense of a rope that we hold onto,

a cord that connects us, to each other and to the Divine.

The Israeli poet Zelda, writes about the Kav in this way.

Zelda’s poetry has been a kav for me this past year.

Zelda was a pious, Hasidic woman, born in Europe.

Her life was filled with tragedy and the loss of loved ones, and

she writes about her sense of despair as a wide, dark pit,

an abyss of pain and loneliness.

Yet, as she faces this pit, she also holds on to what she describes as a kav.

She writes: “nothing but a *kav ha’or*, a line of light,

that extends from the soul to the Creator,

protects me from the *tohu va’vohu*, the chaos and void.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The Jewish view of hope is not a Polly-anna-ish denial of pain.

Zelda, like the author of Eicha, and like Rebbe Nachman,

who also knew great suffering, faces despair, faces the abyss,

but holds on to the *kav ha’or*, the line of light, that is tikvah.

The Jewish version of hope is not a false hope that denies

the reality of climate change or

the reality of Covid

and says “everything is fine, let’s just keep pretending nothing is wrong.”

Rather, it’s being honest about what’s really hard in our world

and resolving nevertheless to choose love and connection.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It’s holding on to the *kav ha’or*, that line of light, that, like Zelda,

we hold onto to cross the pit.

How does this kav of Kaveh, of Tikvah, work?

Let’s look at the first place this word shows up in the Torah,

In the very first chapter of Bereshit.

In creating the world, God says

*Yi****kav****U HaMayim Mitachat HaShamayim El Makom* Echad (1:9)

Let the water be gathered into one makom, one place, making the seas.

*Yikavu*. In its first appearance in the Torah, our Kav shows up in Yikavu,

meaning, according to our commentators Rashi and Ibn Ezra,

“to gather together” and “to come together.”

Tikvah means coming together,

Despite everything that is hard, or *especially* with everything that is hard,

and being that line of connection, that *kav ha’or*, for each other.

I was so moved by Fran Quittel’s recent drash when she spoke about

the support folks in our Netivot Shalom community have provided each other,

building emotional resilience together in these isolating times.

She shared how community members supported her when she needed it this year

and so many in our community support each other through

coming together when one is in need,

for meals, for rides, for shiva visits, for phone calls,

for just showing up on Zoom or here in shul to feel those kavim,

those lines of connection –

for us now, it’s often a phone line or an internet connection –

but those create a *kav ha’or*, a line of light, for each other.

(look around the room, or look around the Zoom boxes on your screen –

See each other, notice the kavim, those lines of connection)

Kav means rope, so Tikvah means throwing someone a rope,

as if they are someone drowning and in need of rescue,

Saying “grab ahold of the kav, I got you! I’m here.”

And knowing that the community will be there to toss you a rope,

when you need a kav to hold onto.

So, first, hope, Tikvah, has at its root, Kav, a rope, a line, a line of light,

that we hold onto in the face of the pit of despair, as Zelda described.

And second, hope is gathering together, *Yikavu El Makom Echad*,

And tossing each other a kav to hold onto.

There is a beautiful story about this power of the kav

in the book Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust

Told by Rabbi Yisrael Spira, the rebbe of Bluzhov.

Rabbi Spira was among the prisoners at the Janowska concentration camp

when the guards suddenly shouted that

everyone was to evacuate to a large nearby field.

For the twisted entertainment of the guards, they instructed the inmates to stand next to a large ditch and jump over. Anyone who didn’t make it across would be shot, and the ditch would become their grave.

The rebbe describes the inmates as skeletons, sick and starving and

Too weak to possibly jump over the ditch.

The rebbe finds himself next to a friend from the camp –

a secular Jew, an “enlightened” man,

but they had nevertheless had formed a close friendship in the camp.

His non-religious friend looked at the rebbe as he prepared to die,

standing at the edge of the pit.

The rebbe looked down at his swollen feet and then looked at his friend, and said,

“We are jumping” and the next thing they knew,

They had somehow made it over the ditch.

With tears streaming down his face, the friend said, “we are alive!

We made it across the ditch. Rebbe, how did you do it?”

Rabbi Spira said: I was holding on to faith and to the merit of my ancestors.

But tell me, my friend, how did YOU make it across?

And the friend said, “I was holding on to you.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

This is the power of the Kav, that line of hope and light,

That can carry us across the pit in times of devastation.

Some of you have approached me with tears in your eyes to say

that being part of this community has been a lifeline, a kav, for you

especially during these difficult past 18 months.

Knowing that we have been a Kav of hope for you to hold onto is a

Kav of light that I hold onto, that gives me hope and the strength to do my work.

Hope is not just a concept in Judaism; it’s a practice. It’s action. It’s how we live.

Our Jewish practices create a web of kavim,

of mutual care and responsibility that is

astonishingly counter-cultural within today’s American values of individualism, where people are often more concerned with their personal freedom

not to wear a mask, for example, than to care for the well-being of others.

We mourn the loss of what sociologists call social capital, that is,

that essential component of society where people

care for each other and trust each other.[[5]](#endnote-5)

But Jewish practice requires us to come together (*Yikavu)*,

To offer a rope, a *Kav*, to each other

And to create hope in this world by forming a web

of interconnected lines of caring.

Jewish hope is a practice of action –

it’s why our Netivot Shalom community comes together in our various initiatives: to organize against climate change,

to fight racism and antisemitism, and most recently to support Afghan refugees.

Just before Rosh Hashana, I gathered with many members of our community

at Senator Feinstein’s office to sound the shofar and call for climate action.

This rally was organized by our Climate Tzedek members and

was part of a national effort through Dayenu,

with similar Jewish groups around the country calling upon our senators

to enact transformational change on climate in the infrastructure bill.[[6]](#endnote-6)

This is Tikvah, Jewish hope:

acknowledging that we stand at the pit and that hope requires our action,

and that we create kavim, a web of interconnected lines of light

for each other and for our world.

There is one more meaning of the Kav, Kaveh, Tikvah, that I want to discuss

As guidance for us in finding hope in this uncertain world.

Each time we say the Amidah,

We offer a little bow and say *Modim Anachnu Lach,*

We are grateful to You, for all of the daily miracles and wonders

That are with us at each moment, and then we conclude the bracha with:

*May’olam Kivinu Lach*. There’s our Kav again. *May’olam* ***Kiv****inu Lach*.

We have always placed our hope in you.

And this hope arises out of the practice of gratitude,

as we find here in the Modim blessing.

The Jewish practice of hope

Is staying connected to the Divine through gratitude

- no matter what else is going on in the world -

Through noticing those daily miracles that are with us each moment.

Those of you who have attended my Offerings of Hope in Gratitude over the last 18 months know that a *kav ha’or* for me has been doing things like

noticing the daily opening of the purple iris in my garden in spring.

With our surroundings more limited by the pandemic,

we can find Hope – *may’olam Kivinu Lach* –

In the gentle fluttering of the orange wings of a monarch butterfly,

Or in the green iridescence of the nape of the hummingbird outside our window.

Each week at our Zoom Kabbalat Shabbat, I invited us before we sang

*Tov Lehodot L’Adonai*, it’s good to give thanks to God,

To notice something we are grateful for.

Gratitude creates a kav of hope, no matter how uncertain the world might feel.

There is a wonderful book called Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer

That has been like medicine for me in recent months.

(It sits close to my Zelda book on my pandemic go-to-for-solace bookshelf.)

The author is both Native American and a professor of botany, and she

brings together indigenous wisdom and science and says this:

“Even a wounded world is feeding us.

Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy.

I choose joy over despair.

Not because I have my head in the sand,

but because joy is what the Earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.” [[7]](#endnote-7)

Kimmerer calls it reciprocity – the notion that gratitude for the Earth’s gifts leads to a reciprocal and ecologically healthy relationship with the Earth.

She puts it like this: “all flourishing is mutual.”

It’s the same in Judaism.

When we offer up gratitude, we create a kav,

a line of connection that is two-directional, reciprocal, mutual.

This is the teaching of the 18th Century Italian Kabbalist,

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto:

He teaches that there’s a Kav, a line, a beam, of Tikvah

That starts with *us*, a *kav tikvato*, he calls it - a line of hope,

Which rises up, and arouses the shefa, the Divine flow from above.

He lived and died during a plague, interestingly,

And Luzatto taught that the one who has hope*, hamekaveh*, and expresses it

through mitzvot, through prayer, and song,

breaks through the darkness and releases the Divine flow of blessing.[[8]](#endnote-8)

It’s Kabbalistic imagery that reflects something that is just true.

When we sing out in song and poetry and prayer,

when we feel and express gratitude, for the irises, the butterflies and hummingbirds, or whatever it is you feel grateful for,

When we do mitzvot and care for another,

We are creating a kav, which brings more hope into the world,

for ourselves and for each other.

The Mishnah about Yom Kippur says[[9]](#endnote-9) “*Mikveh Yisrael Hashem*.”

Quoting Jeremiah, “God is the Mikveh of Israel.”

It’s a gorgeous play on words. God is both the purifying waters of the mikveh,

And (there’s our kav again) Mikveh shares the root meaning with Tikvah,

so the verse means: God is the hope of Israel.

And we can immerse ourselves in that hope like a Mikveh in these ways.

We’ve seen hope to mean:

A *Kav*, a rope, a line of light, that we hold on to at the pit,

And that we toss to another to hold onto.

A gathering together, *Yikavu,* for collective action and caring.

And *May’olam Kivinu Lach*, a cyclical flow of gratitude and reciprocity.

There is much that is broken in our world, and it’s easy to fall into despair

as Rebbe Nachman knew.

The Jewish path is not to deny the brokenness.

Our great poets and prophets and rabbis knew

that we stand at the edge of a frightening abyss, with much that is uncertain.

And they said *Ulai Yesh Tikvah*, even with all of this destruction,

Maybe there is hope.

And they understood that we create hope through *Kavim*, through lines, lines,

of connection and support and caring – that can carry us across that pit.

*Yayikavu* -By gathering together in action to care for each other and for our world.

And through *May’olam kivinu lach*, cultivating hope through gratitude,

no matter what’s going on in this ever more precarious world.

This is our Jewish practice of *Tikvah*, of being a *mekaveh*,

of holding on to the *kav* and tossing it to another.

What are the kavim that you create? That you hold onto? That you offer another?

Yes, there are plenty of reasons to feel despair. Let’s be honest about that.

But, *Ulai Yesh Tikvah*. Let us create hope, enact hope, offer hope and

sing hope to each other and to the world:

*Kaveh El Adonai, Hazak V’ya’emetz libecha v’kaveh el Adonai.*

Hope in God. Make your heart strong and courageous and have hope.[[10]](#endnote-10)

[sing]

1. See <https://biblehub.com/bdb/6960.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Zelda, Tzipor Achuzat Kesem, p. 72 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Thanks to my colleague Rabbi Eric Woodward for his post on Tisha B’av that expressed this idea beautifully [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Yaffa Eliach, Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust, p. 1-4 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Judaism’s Life-Changing Ideas, p. 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://dayenu.org/just-green-recovery#meetings> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass, p. 327. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzato, “Otzrot HaRamchal” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Yoma 8:9 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Gratitude to my friend, Brian Schachter-Brooks, for his melody for Kaveh, which has been a kav for me over the last decade and which I sing often in prayer: <https://soundcloud.com/user-122336779/kaveh> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)