

Getting Better All The Time
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5776
September 14, 2015

This past summer I got a song stuck in my soul. It's by the Beatles, and it brings back memories – vinyl records and stereo speakers and psychedelic album covers. The words play out as a balancing act and a delicate dance for me, between ringing hollow, and holding out hope. You'll recognize which song it is, I think – or, at least, those of you who have heard of the Beatles probably will -- in a few moments.

The lyrics started playing in my head as soon as I read a column by the Israeli Arab writer Sayed Kashua. As some of you may know, Kashua has, quite publicly, “quit” living in Israel; he packed up his bags in the summer of 2014, left his Jerusalem apartment, said goodbye to his home town of Tira, and, landed, with his family, in Chicago. There, in the unfamiliar landscape of an American heartland, he teaches writing. And he continues his weekly columns in *HaAretz*, focusing on the misadventures of life from the perspective of someone who is, existentially, neither here nor there, wherever he goes.

I love Kashua's insights on identity, his wit and warmth, and yet what he wrote this August was really troubling. It is as if he has... given up... on something really important. He used Google Earth, he said, placed Jerusalem at the center of the universe, then traveled north, near Nablus, to the village of Duma. There, he looked for the houses of the Dawabsheh family, scene of arson and murder this summer at the hands of Jewish terrorists. Then he

returned to Jerusalem through the virtual lens, gazing at Liberty Bell Park... where the pride parade was interrupted this year... by a knife-wielding madman. Then a few blocks away, to the entrance of the school he brought his children to – a mixed Arab-Jewish school... and looked at the entrance, looking, there for any sign of Shira's parents... "don't you remember, her, Dad," his daughter asked, she was in my class...you must have seen her parents... Shira Banki, the teenager murdered at the pride parade.

And finally Kashua looked for Tirah, his home, his school. He thought of how he was raised, and what he had been taught, and he wrote the following:

Once, when the grown-ups promised us that in time things would only improve, that by the time we finished school everything would look different. Once, when our parents and teachers told us that the way of the world was in the direction of progress, that the feeling of freedom and liberty would only grow with the years. Once, when I believed my father, who told me that our generation would be different and that if his generation hadn't succeeded in forging peace, we would be capable of it...

I paused the cursor in front of my parents' house and wondered whether I too should tell my children those stories. Am I also obliged to implant hope in their hearts and promise them that their generation will bring about the coveted changes? Is it my role as a parent to appear to be filled with conviction when I promise my children that the day will come when things will look different, that if we didn't succeed, then it will be their generation that will uproot racism and violence, and guarantee full equality? Should I lie to my children in order to give them as happy a childhood as possible, as my parents did?

So asks Sayed Kashua. Should we lie to our children? Is it really a lie? Does it have to be a lie to think...are we really ready to give up on the idea... is it just a fantasy to say, with the song , that it's getting better all the time?

Certainly, for many of us, perhaps for all of us at some point in our lives, these are words that ring hollow; they tear and tease and taunt with the sting of false hope. For some facing illness, coping with loss, coming face to face with problems which cannot be overcome, no, really, it's not getting better. For a family in mourning, sometimes even the most well-meant words of reassurance hit the wrong note; they sound stale. Closer to their reality, it seems, to assert... it's getting bitter all the time.

And some people are in such dire straits that hope seems utterly beyond reach. Whole families are losing their homes, fleeing their land, facing violence and loss that offer no escape. How do they see it getting better, from where they are now?

And sometimes the very word, "better," is held up as a kind of chimeric fantasy, an imagined outcome based on nothing *but* hope. I actually feel this way about, well, *both* sides, in the highly contentious argument over the Iran Nuclear Deal. Supporters of the agreement are hoping that by buying time, a "better" Iran will magically emerge. Opponents fantasize that... there was a "better" deal to be had. Whether or not Iran will be closer or further from going nuclear, the rhetoric is already radioactive.

So in our lives, and in the world around us alike, the assertion that you've "got to admit, it's getting better" can backfire. It can simply seem like a lie.

And yet, I think, there is something central to the human experience, something essential about the premise of these holy days, something fundamental about our politics and our personal lives as well... that depends on a hint of hope. On optimism at the center of the cosmos. Indeed, at the prospect that somehow, some way, some day, things will indeed be better.

Just as healing does not necessarily mean finding a cure, better does not mean being perfect. It means... that an unbearable burden... somehow... becomes something we can carry with us. It means that a problem that seems the center of our universe, which takes up our entire world... will someday be seen from a broader and deeper perspective.

I believe that it is not a lie... to lay down a foundation based on hope. And that we can train our children, and ourselves, towards a healthy, balanced perspective in how we face the world.

I find the roots of that perspective in a classic tale, a fanciful fable I have often acted out at Tot Shabbat, but not really thought that deeply about, before now.

A story, from Shir HaShirim Rabah, the Midrash on the Biblical poetic book called Song of Songs:

א"ר מאיר בשעה שעמדו ישראל לפני הר סיני לקבל התורה אמר להם
הקב"ה אלעיקי אני נותן לכם את התורה אלא הביאו לי ערבים טובים
שתשמרו ואני נותנה לכם

R. Meir said: "When Israel stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, the Holy One, blessed be God, said to them: 'Indeed, shall I give you the Torah? Bring me sureties, bring me good guarantees or pledges that you will keep it, and then I will give it to you.' They replied: 'Sovereign of the Universe, our ancestors will be our guarantors.' God said to them: 'I have faults to find in your ancestors.' They then said: 'Sovereign of the Universe, our prophets will be our sureties.' God replied: 'I have faults to find with them,' for it is written "Your prophets have been like foxes in ruins" (Ezekiel 13:4). Still, bring Me good sureties and I will give it to you. Then they said to God: 'Our children shall be our sureties.' To which God replied: 'Indeed, these are good guarantors. For their sake I will give the Torah to you.'

This is a very strange story. Much of Jewish life rests on the concept of *Zechut Avot*, the merit of the ancestors. We begin the central section of the prayer service, the Amidah, reminding God and, essentially, ourselves, that we are the great, great grandchildren of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and, in Reform settings, we add Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. We are only here, many if not most of us, because of the convictions and commitments of our ancestors.

But, when sharing this story this past summer, my teacher Yehuda Kurtzer referred to Festivus, that great but entirely fictional holiday in the contemporary commentary called Seinfeld. George Constanza's father, Frank, opens the observance of Festivus with an airing of grievances. He pulls no punches. "I got a lot of problems with you people!" Our ancestors may have had many merits. But their shortcomings are written, and sealed as well. For good, and for ill, their story is in the past.

The prophets, then? Those giants of social justice whose moral certainty and powerful invective against wrongdoers we preserve and recite to this day? What about giving the Torah, on condition that we live up to their expectations, that we meet a certain standard, that we behave in a certain way?

But the thing is, we won't do that. Not entirely. We won't, because no one can live up to those standards. It is aspirational, it is inspirational, it guides us... but it is also too much. Note that none of the prophets were -- how do we put it? -- healthy, happy, well-adjusted individuals. Few, if any, had families themselves. And while there are some issues about which we can reach moral clarity, and prophetic certainty... not always. Not all the time.

But our children? Our future? Not just our own children, but our students, our future generations? Not only is that tale not yet told, but also, in them, we embrace a commitment to continue our story. We promise that our tradition will live on, in spite of the very real brokenness we may feel, the pain of the present, the trials and tragedies we face -- even despite the very deep flaws in it as well, practitioners who burn and stab and hate in the name of a greater good.

We are willing to say, even if it does not always work, even if it is not perfect that, in Kurtzer's words "we undertake a moral obligation to the optimistic possibility that it will be better, just by trying to continue it. We may not be able to fix all of our problems on our own, but if we make a commitment to continue it, maybe these problems will get sorted out over time."

This is a story about the essential nature of the Torah. What is it? For whom is it meant? How does it work in our lives? What I take away from it is this: our ancestors, saintly or sinners, amazing or awful, cannot, now, get better than they were. Our prophets, demanding, insistent, impatient, impassioned, even zealous, want us to be better than we can possibly be. But our children? And by extension those of us who are here to teach and guide them? Growing, learning. Imperfect, but able to improve. Capable, soon to come into moral agency of their own. That... that is where Torah lives. That is what it is for.

Here is what else I hope we can take home, from a rabbinic tale from long ago. **First, “not on account of our ancestors.” We should remember where we came from, but we should put more energy into where we are yet to go.**

Second, “not on account of the prophets.” We should try to do good, try to be good, to be better... but remember at the same time... that no one is perfect.

Third, “for the sake of our children.” What we tell our children... not only reflects our world, but shapes theirs, and ours. What we say prescribes, rather than describes. We make the world what it is, through what we see and what we say. And we know that the time will come... just as we inherited a world of puzzles and problems and pain, well, the time will come

when we place that fate and faith... in your hands. With *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Ancestors: “*lo alecha ham'lacha lig'mor*, it is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. *V'lo ata ben chorim l'hivatel mimena*. But neither are you free to desist from it.”

Finally, everything hangs in a balance. We hover between order and chaos, between Torah and the wilderness. We stand between bitter and better, pain and potential, hope and despair. Slowly, patiently, with growth and maturity, we work to shape the world, to tip the scale, towards optimism and opportunity, towards happiness and a healthier way of looking at life.

Remember, Sayed Kashua, sitting with his children... Remember, all of us, at home and watching the news, missing Jon Stewart... Remember in the midst of mayhem and woe, the old Chasidic tale, of the man with two pockets. Yes, it is true, that when he was haughty, and feeling invincible, he was supposed to reach into one pocket, and pull out a note with the words “*anokhi afar v'eifar*; I am but dust and ashes.” Today, though... today I am interested in his other pocket. For there, available at times of sadness or loneliness, facing feelings of insignificance or unable to change himself or the world, there was a note which read: “*Bishvili nivra et haOlam*; for my sake was the world created.”

There are moments of frustration, helplessness in light of world events, struggle with personal problems, drowning in sorrow and loss. A reframe, a shifting of focus, getting through one day, making plans for another day, taking comfort in something small we can control, or improve... this won't solve all our problems. But it can help... more often, and more deeply, than we will ever know, if we don't try.

Attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav: "it is forbidden to give up hope." And "*HaTikvah*, the hope," becomes an anthem. To hold on to hope is hard. That is why it is a commandment – not because it is easy but because it is difficult. And that is why it is sung... because what we sing sometimes resonates at an even deeper level than what we simply say.

"Man, I was mean, but I'm changing my scene, and I'm doing the best that I can." A perfect message, for a season of our imperfection. And in the midst of horror, a message of hope.

Shanah Tovah.