

***The Gift of the Jews is Hope***  
***Yom Kippur 5771 / September 18, 2010***  
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When I was little my parents called me “Jay Jay.” I think they called me this because they couldn’t add a “y” to the end of my name to make it sound cute like they did with my brother Sethy. However, I’m pretty sure it was because of my boundless energy and, for my parents it was like having two kids instead of one. Recently, I came to a painful realization. My optimistic, buoyant, energetic child is gone. This year, I am going to rediscover him. This year, I am going to find the optimism, the hopefulness, and the sincere joy I once embraced. I didn’t lose it over night. It came on slowly and almost imperceptibly:

- It started with the baseball games that had to be postponed because my father had to officiate at a funeral.
- It happened because of the trips that were canceled because the weather was uncooperative.
- It came from the letters of rejection.
- It came from girlfriends who said they just wanted to be friends.
- It came when overlooked for a promotion.

So, I realize it didn’t happen all at once, it has been a slow evolution. It dawned on me that I am not the same person as I was as a child, a person who stood up to the plate and expected to hit the game-winning home run. Somewhere along the way, through the circuitous route of life, I lost my optimism and I lost my hope. This year, I am going to get it back and, as Helen Keller once said, “No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars, or sailed to an enchanted land, or opened a heaven to the human spirit.”

I thought cynicism would set in much later in my life. From my vantage point and the varied interaction I have with so many people, I assumed I wouldn’t become cynical until at least my 70’s. I know that cynicism isn’t good but it does ease the pain of disappointment. We are all grownups, so let’s speak frankly. Each of us has had disappointments, some are professional, some are interpersonal and some are just plain individual.

Sometimes it’s hard to believe and life disappoints us, but I am always on the lookout for those inspiring moments. As George Strait once said, “Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the number of moments that take our breath away.”

Last night I spoke of the need for us to survive, however, we all know there must be more than just survival. There must be a purpose beyond that. There must be a unique contribution that we have for being here, for continuing where others have failed and for existing, both as a people and as a nation – especially when so many others have disappeared. Heschel once wrote, “Religion has often suffered from the tendency to become an end in and of itself ... It has done more to canonize prejudices than wrestle for the truth, to petrify the sacred rather than to sanctify the secular.” (*Depth Theology in The Insecurity of Freedom*, page 115) There is a reason why we have survived the pogroms, the expulsions, and the Holocaust. It is because we have a unique contribution to make to humanity.

To borrow a phrase from Thomas Cahill, “What is our gift?” Our gift to the world isn’t kindness. There are plenty of kind people in the world. Our gift to the world is not Judeo-Christian values, though maybe at one point it was. Our gift to the world is not our moral superiority, though I wish it

was. Our gift to the world isn't technology or science or medicine, though we certainly are disproportionately contributing in those areas.

Our gift lies in the State of Israel. Not in the unique society that has been created there or the incredible achievements of this fledgling enterprise. No, it lies in its very anthem, "*Hatikvah, the Hope*." In the face of certain and never-ending conflict and throughout history, Israel and our people have said, "Tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow the sun will come up. *Gam Zeh Yaavor*." Our necessary contribution, our essential gift is **hope**, is **belief**. This year, I am going to recover it and I encourage you to join me. Every time pessimism creeps in I am going to shut the door. Every time negativity and disbelief make an appearance, I am going to reject them.

The day the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority were announced, Hamas killed four of our people, including a mother and father of six, and a pregnant mother. My reflexive response was, "Let's forget about the talks." Look, we all know the reality. Mahmoud Abbas has no control over the Palestinians and certainly not his rivals in Hamas. Are we just fooling ourselves? In order to make a deal you have to sit with the people who can make the deal. So, let's forget the charade of peace talks and let's stop encouraging Israel to give up more and more so that we have even more rockets rain down on us. It just seems that every time we enter peace talks, Jews die. However, this year I am saying, "No" to that mentality.

I have studied the history of the Cold War, when proxy wars were the *modus operandus*. I have read about the periods of relative calm and also of international high tension:

- the Berlin Blockade (1948–1949)
- the Korean War (1950–1953)
- the Berlin Crisis of 1961
- the Vietnam War (1959–1975)
- the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)
- the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–1989)
- and the Able Archer 83 NATO exercises in November 1983

The Cold War ended after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Maybe there is hope but I can't help wondering why we keep going back to the peace talks and why we keep making offers.

I can't even count the number of times we say the word, "Shalom," in our liturgy. We talk and talk and talk about peace. Maybe you remember the sermon I gave in which we sang about the word for "peace" in seven other languages. We taught that every culture and every society has a word for peace because this is the hope for all civilized people everywhere. However, in my core I feel that we haven't got a prayer. This year and this time, I am going to fight that disillusionment and I'm going to reject that disenchantment.

There is an inspirational teaching in our weekday prayer book that shares the idea that:

- We ought to support the poor of the non-Jewish world as we support the poor of our own people and
- we ought to visit the sick of the non-Jewish world the way we visit our own brothers and sisters and

- we ought to mourn and bury the dead of the outside world the way we mourn and bury our own.

*Mipnei darchei shalom*, for the sake of peace. Our wise and seasoned sages teach and implore us to do whatever is necessary, *Mipnei darchei shalom*, for the sake of peace. We are willing to do so much, *Mipnei darchei shalom*, for the sake of peace.

- I remember when Begin shook hands with Sadat – Israel gave up so much on September 18, 1978.
- I even remember the elation of the prospect of peace when Rabin shook hands with the criminal and terrorist, Yasir Arafat, during the Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993.
- I watched the handshake between King Hussein I of Jordan and Yitzhak Rabin on October 26, 1994.

So, for today I am going to remember and be inspired by the “Rabins” and the “Sadats” of the world, while I leave the “Arafats” to the hands of the Israeli government and its armed forces. Israel is now amidst another round of peace talks, the jockeying is playing itself out in the media and, like always, Israel is losing the public-relations war. This time, even fellow Jews are jumping in against the government of Israel and, once again, the doubt starts to infect. However, this year I say, “No.” I ask you to join me and let’s continue to pray for peace. Let us pray for Gilad Shalit, the young soldier still held captive after more than four years, and for our future and for the future of the world. I pray for our continued capacity to hope.