

Ema, What's optimism?

What's optimism, motek / sweetie? Let me think a moment....

You know when you're getting ready to go to a puppet show, and you expect that it's going to be terrific? Well, that's hope. Optimism is when you go to the show feeling that, no matter what, you're going to enjoy it. Even if something goes wrong with a puppet, or the snack you brought falls on the floor, or the seat is uncomfortable, you are going to like being there. And, despite it all, you'll be happy to go back for another show that is likely to be better. That's optimism.

Okay?

Mmmm. I'm not sure, Ema.

So go ask Sabba, your grandfather.

Sabba, what's optimism?

Optimism, eh? So now you're asking grown-up questions? Well, I had a lot of optimism when I was young, then I lost it when I made a few mistakes.

So I changed my plans and worked in the family business for a few years sorting it out. And while not everything went smoothly, I kept at it and was sure it would turn out right. And now here we are! That's optimism! Does that answer your question?

I don't think so.

No? Oh. Try asking Bubbe.

Bubbe, can you tell me what's optimism?

Oh, optimism... Hah! We once lived — ate, drank, slept — optimism. In the old country, some exciting ideas were floating around. Ways to work together for a brighter future, ways to be good to all people, ways that men and women could be more equal.

People weren't equal?

What? No, not then. But we young people worked hard and we had optimism that we would change the world for better. Then the government decided that our good didn't really matter to them; they cared only about their own good. And they sent us far from home where it was very cold. It was terrible; very little healthy food. I hurt my leg there and there were no doctors. That's why I don't walk so well.

We were lucky to come here, and we managed to make a life. Now I have optimism that you will have an easier time, because you're growing up in a house filled with love. And thank God you'll never be hungry the way we were in that faraway place. Do you understand?

No, not really.

Well, then, go ask your Rabbi.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, optimism is "hopefulness and confidence about the future or the successful outcome of something; a tendency to take a favorable or hopeful view." Hope is the "expectation of something desired; desire combined with expectation."

Hope is more a feeling; optimism is a belief upon which you act. You may hope to pass a test, despite not having prepared. You are optimistic that you will pass the test **because** you have prepared.

André Siegfried, 19-20th c French writer:

The Jewish [people] is characterized by this somewhat contradictory combination: a strong optimism in material and social matters along with a deep philosophical pessimism...

Which, of course, brings to mind the classic joke:

The Pessimist moans: It just can't get any worse. The Optimist pipes up: Sure it can!

Siegfried's characterization mostly holds true today. We're not so concerned about our economic state here in the U.S., perhaps not even about our cultural contributions.

However, we have been facing so many challenges of late: Harassment, cancelation/erasure, libel, blanket accusation, denial of documented reality, physical assault, emotional tension, insult, vandalism, and more.

We have spent, are spending, vast sums of money for security to enable us to live our Jewish lives as Jewishly as we can within the constraints of security. Joy? Celebration? Sure, if you're on the list and there's an armed guard at the door. Spontaneity? Not so much.

The whole idea that we need to be concerned to this degree about others attacking us should be the depth of

absurdity. Sadly, it is also clear rationality, and critical. Security is a burden on our psyches and our budgets.

We must remain aware of what is at play around us and, above all, keep in mind what is at stake. That doesn't mean we can abandon optimism! However, optimism can't be founded in ignorance. It is not wishful thinking. Optimism is the drive, the engine, to DO SOMETHING.

I harbor a fantasy that in a year, or three or five, most of those who stridently proclaim support for terrorists and, effectively, for the eradication of Israel — and consequently, the deaths of millions of Israeli Jews — will awaken one day with a painful realization of what they had been advocating. Will that be a “gosh, we were young” moment, or an inspiration for atonement, whatever form that could take by then? May we live long and healthy to find out!

Should my fantasy come true, for what would those people atone?

Al cheit, For the sin of... Being young, being gullible; hardening hearts; thoughtlessness; acting knowingly and deceitfully; using foul speech; arrogance; rashly judging others; baseless hatred; succumbing to confusion...

We can atone for wrongdoing while remaining optimistic that we can alter our negative behaviors, even just a little bit, will make not only our lives better, but also benefit those around us.

Without optimism, we may as well close up shop. If we can't envision a future of promise and fulfillment, we can't hide behind saying, “Just being realistic, right?”

Here are a few examples of optimism in our sacred texts: Starting with Avraham.

We don't know, can't know, the backstory of how the relationship between Adonai our God and Avraham began. Midrash, rabbis' imaginative story-telling, offers various explanations: Like me, you may have grown up with the story of Terach, Avraham's father being a manufacturer of idols. Avraham sees the impotence of clay figurines and seeks a different Source of life.

That tale is midrash. Torah tells us that Avraham heeds Adonai's instruction to leave family and home and ... “just start walking — I'll show you where,” says Adonai. The optimism that his descendants will thrive and matter —to the point that “nations will wish themselves to be like your generations” — was the underpinning of his life.

Moshe. Maybe a reluctant optimist. A man of faith and loyalty to Adonai, a firm believer in the mission of achieving the Promised Land, Moshe was plagued by the fickle Israelites; they just wouldn't listen! But he kept them going ... for 40 years!

Hannah, barren, and bereft because of it, nonetheless believes and opens her heart in prayer. She is optimistic that Adonai will hear her pleas. (She was right.)

The High Holy Days. Where did we get the term High Holy Days? OR, as some have it, the High Holidays? Torah calls the most special days — Shabbat, festivals — *mikra kodesh*, a holy occurrence, a sacred assembly or occasion. “High Holy Days” may have been borrowed (coopted?) from an English phrase (?).

Consider *Yamim Norai'im*, Days of Awe. The root of *Nora'im* is the same as for **Yir'a**, meaning reverence, awe, or fear.

In a JTS reflection, Rabbi Gordon Tucker asks: **Are these Days of Fear or Days of Awe?** Thinking of this period of introspection, repentance, renewal and return as Days of Awe, he writes, can color them with the optimism and joy that was more likely their character in ancient times.

The **Avoda service** toward the end of musaf tomorrow morning describes, in poetry that may be a thousand years old, the Yom Kippur service of the Kohein Gadol, the high priest in the *beit hamikdash*, the ancient temple in Jerusalem. The kohein gadol puts his life on the line to make atonement for the people Israel. How? He enters the *kodesh kodashim*, the Holy of Holies within the Mikdash, this one time each year.

The Jews in Temple times held their collective breath when the Kohein Gadol entered the inner sanctum. If he does everything correctly, and Adonai accepts the rites with favor, the kohen will survive the process and the

Israelites will rejoice. Yom Kippur: a day of tension and, we expect, of release.

In ancient times, the Yom Kippur included a joyful experience. Remember the shidduch-seeking outdoor mid-summer speed-dating **tu b'av, the 15th day of Av**, not even a week after the fast day of **tish'a b'av** that commemorates some of the lowest points in our history?

Here's what happens on tu b'av, according to the second-century legal compilation, the Mishna:

The sons and daughters of Israel would go out dressed in white....The daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards. And they would say: "Young man, lift up your eyes and see what you choose for yourself... Don't set your eyes upon beauty; rather, set your eyes upon family..." (Ta'anit 4:8)

We could have been left to wallow in despair after the fast day of tish'a b'av, but optimism reigns: despite the devastation, we will continue to dance in the fields and build the relationships to reinvigorate our people!

Likewise on Yom Kippur: Even though we're fasting on a day of atonement, we look to the future, and try to make shidduchim, matches! **Am yisrael chai**, indeed!

But rabbi, where do Ema, Sabba and Bubbe keep their optimism? I've never seen it.

It's different for each person. For your Ema, in the new shoes she ordered for you, one size larger.

For your Sabbath, in the hard work he is still willing to do.

For Bubbe, in the photos of her parents, your great-grandparents — and of you and your parents — that she keeps on her dresser.

And for me, it is right here, in this room!

It is all of **you** valuing and respecting traditions and rituals that have sustained us for centuries. It is in **your being open to** reconsidering and renewing those traditions and rituals to imbue them with spirituality that speaks to us. Optimism is your being here today with expectations of uplift and fervor, of inspiration and insight.

Optimism is showing up for Yom Kippur, a challenging day by every measure. Optimism is poring over the 44 double-alphabetic-acrostic-structured transgressive actions we may have committed over the last year and being grateful that Hebrew has only 22 letters.

The late Rabbi Alan Lew wrote a book on the Days of Awe: "This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared." He writes that for Yom Kippur to be effective, "we have to find a way from unconscious to conscious; we have to become aware of our moral and spiritual condition... Moreover, we have to become aware of the precise nature of our blunders."

"Blunders." What a gentle way to describe transgressions! Transgression means to step across, as in crossing a moral or legal line. Calling transgression a "blunder" humanizes it, to my view, making having done wrong something to engage with rather than fear.

Rabbi Lew continues, "Despite what we pray, teshuva — repenting, returning, responding — will not change what happens **to us**; it may enable us to change **how we react to** what happens to us."

Optimism is not being terrified by truth. Yes, we are not perfect. Yes, the world can be frightening; what evil humans are capable of doing to fellow humans is at very least disconcerting. If we close our eyes out of fear, we may as well move into our clothes closets or windowless basements and turn off the WiFi.

L'fum tzara agra, according to the effort is the reward.

– Ben Hei Hei, *Ethics of the Fathers*, 5:26.

Each of us can do **something**: Contribute to an organization that is working on ameliorating a challenging situation, volunteer where we can; attend classes or presentations; help educate our own community.

For some time now, I have been working on a new song titled "Brave to Love." The song is my reaction to so much of the news, and to the tenacity of human nature and the resilience of Israelis. Despite, or perhaps because of, living in the Middle East pressure cooker,

our American-born nephew and his sabra wife recently celebrated the birth of their first child.

Brave to Love when missiles are flying.
 Brave to Love when there's way too much dying.
 Brave to love when each day brings new fears.
 Brave to love when weeks feel like years.

Rabbi Avi Strausberg, senior director of national learning at Hadar Institute, writes about a phrase we recited immediately following the shofar blowing on Rosh Hashana. *Hayom harat olam*, translated in our machzor as “Today the world stands as at birth,” can also be translated as “Today is the birthday of the world” or “Today the world is conceived.”

Rabbi Strausberg suggests a different slant: “Today is pregnant forever.” How does she get to “pregnant” from “*harat*”? The Hebrew root for “*harat*” is the same as for “*hayriyon*,” pregnancy. And “*olam*,” while meaning “the earth,” is also a word for eternity, as in “*I’olam va’ed*.”

Pregnancy can be a time of great optimism and even engender a sense of power — *I’m growing a human being!* It can also be a time of great discomfort and anxiety.

Hayom harat olam. We are always waiting and ready, we are forever pregnant with possibility.

We may have no idea how to move from the reality we are living toward the dream we envision. Yet we stand together optimistically on this Yom Kippur, before the open gates of heaven. Perhaps we will glimpse the tomorrow that can be birthed by our joining voices and hearts in song and prayer and intention.

G’mar chatima tova!