

Finding Comfort When Optimism Fails

Shabbat Nachamu 5784

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Colum McCann writes:

“Parts of the Atacama desert in Chile have never had any recorded rainfall. It is one of the driest places on earth, but the local farmers have learned to harvest water from the air by suspending large nets to catch cloud banks rolling in from the Pacific coast.

“When the fog touches the tall nets, it forms drops of moisture. The water rolls down along the plastic strands and moves through small gutters, collecting at the bottom of the net, where a trickle is funneled into a pipe that leads to a cistern.

“All across the landscape, high metal poles hold the dark nets against the pale sky. The fog is captured early in the morning before the sun burns the clouds off.

“Out of nothing, something.”ⁱ

The local farmers of that Chilean desert are not **optimistic** that rain will water their fields. Optimism is the expectation or belief that the future will be better than the present. Hope, by contrast, is trust, some could say faith, that an investment of time and effort, energy and commitment, can build a better tomorrow. Optimism is passive. Hope requires action. Having erected those nets in the sky, the farmers have cause to **hope** that the desert will bloom.

On Tuesday, we observed Tisha B’ Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, a day to commemorate catastrophes that befell our people on that date in ages past. Traditional observance includes fasting, sitting on the floor, and reciting the Book of Lamentations, biblical verses of grief over the destruction of the First Jerusalem Temple in 586 B.C.E.

This evening, we begin *שבת נחמו*, the Shabbat of Comfort. Our Haftarah begins, *נחמו נחמו עמי*, “Comfort, comfort my people.” The medieval commentator Rashi asks why the word *נחמו*, comfort, is repeated. The first “comfort,” he says, is to provide solace to the prophets who accurately predicted doom; the second, for the people.ⁱⁱ Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz goes further, suggesting that the prophets needed consolation in order to comfort others: Those who have been prophets of doom are exhorted now to provide solace to the people.ⁱⁱⁱ

Each Shabbat from now to Rosh Hashanah, our Haftarah will come from the end of the Book of Isaiah. In each, the prophet preaches hope, not mere optimism. In ancient days, most people assumed that conquest indicated that the conquering people's gods were stronger than those worshiped by the vanquished. The Israelite prophet taught instead that the God of Israel was yet in control. Remaining faithful to their God, not assimilating into the prosperous lifestyle of Babylon where they had been exiled, our ancestors could anticipate return to God's graces and the Land of Israel when the geopolitical tide would one day turn. The prophet gives the people a job to do, a way to comfort themselves through action with faith.

Sometimes, hope entails taking steps that may seem futile in their time. The Babylonian exile lasted a half century or so—brief in the scope of history, but the bulk of a human lifetime. The prophet demands that the Israelites live in a way that will bear fruit in a future they may not live to see.

Another prophet, Jeremiah, tells a story to illustrate this point. His cousin Chanam-el had fallen on hard times to the extent that he had to sell his ancestral land in Anatot, not far from Jerusalem. Jeremiah was Chanam-el's closest relative, and biblical law obligated the prophet to purchase the land, to keep it in the family. The sale, though, took place shortly before the destruction of the First Temple, which Jeremiah had already foretold. He could not anticipate planting and harvesting his newly purchased field. Therefore, he sealed the deed in a clay jar, preserving it for future generations, teaching that return from exile might not come soon, but it would come all the same. The land would be Israel's once again.^{iv} Jeremiah manifests **hope** in a brighter future through action.

In 2023, I was in Israel three times—the last, in November, after October 7, but the other two were at a very different era if only a few months earlier. Returning in February and July, I told you about the greatest display of Zionism I had ever personally witnessed. Israelis repeatedly took to the streets, sacrificing untold time and treasure in the struggle to preserve their democracy. They had no reason for optimism. The government held all the cards, a clear majority in the Knesset, as it pushed to neuter the courts and empower unfettered rule by an extremist populist mob. The opposition placed its trust in action. They demonstrated that life would be disrupted on an almost daily basis unless the government stood down. At Shabbat dinner in the home of members of a Reform Congregation in Shoham, my host confidently assured me, “We will prevail,” an expression of hope grounded in action.

Colum McCann's book, *Apeirogon*, is not about the Chilean desert—but it is, in a sense, about irrigating fields where no rain falls. The author tells the story of two bereaved fathers. Not long ago, I introduced you to Bassam Aramin and

Rami Elchanan—one Palestinian; the other, Israeli. Rami and Bassam are leaders of the Parents Circle-Family Forum, a club to which nobody would wish to belong, as the price of admission is a loved one killed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Together, Bassam, Rami, their sons, and others toil away at a task that seems futile. They are determined to end the conflict, or at least the killing and the inhumane treatment of one another.

Bassam puts it this way:

“We have to keep on going. We have to. Rami and me, [we] are together on this...Once I thought we could never solve our conflict, we would continue hating each other forever, but it is not written anywhere that we have to go on killing each other. The hero makes a friend of his enemy. That’s my duty. That’s all it is, my duty. When they killed my daughter, they killed my fear. I have no fear. I can do anything now. [My grandson] will, one day, live in peace, it has to happen. Sometimes it seems like we’re trying to draw water from the ocean with a spoon. But peace is a fact. A matter of time. Look at South Africa, Northern Ireland, Germany, France, Japan, even Egypt. Who would have believed it possible? Did the Palestinians kill six million Israelis? Did the Israelis kill six million Palestinians? But the Germans killed six million Jews; and look, now we have an Israeli diplomat in Berlin, and we have a German ambassador in Tel Aviv. You see, nothing is impossible. As long as I am not occupied, as long as I have my rights, as long as you allow me to move around, to vote, to be human, then anything is possible.”^v

I hope that none of us ever confronts the horror that upended the life of Bassam Aramin. Still, each of us faces situations that challenge our ability to be optimistic. Many of us are fearful for Israel—for the hostages, for the future of a secure Jewish state living at peace, for the capacity of Israel to be both Jewish and democratic. We may be pessimistic about America, too—about the outcome of the upcoming election, whomever we favor; about the future of American democracy or its security, and about the divisions that are tearing our nation apart. We also face personal challenges—a devastating diagnosis, a failing relationship, career disruption, the wellbeing of parents or children. Whatever troubles us, we are not powerless, even if our ability to determine a positive outcome is limited, at least in the short term. Each of us **can** take steps to avoid the future we fear and to achieve the tomorrow of our dreams. Let us find comfort for ourselves and provide consolation to one another by building our own version of nets in the sky, grabbing droplets and making our deserts bloom.

Amen.

ⁱ Colum McCann, *Apeirogon*, New York: Random House, 2016, Kindle edition, page 246 of 468.

ⁱⁱ Rashi on Isaiah 40:1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Steinsaltz on Isaiah 40:1.

^{iv} Jeremiah 32:6:27.

^v McCann, p. 241 of 468.