

Rabbi Jen Feldman  
Sermon, **Rosh Hashana Day 1**

Shannah tovah, everyone. I would like to begin my remarks this morning by thanking the 2008 Presidential nominees for providing me with a starting place for this year's sermon topic. Fear not, no endorsements are to follow. Rather, I want to delve a little deeper from a Jewish perspective into a recurring theme of this election year: hope.

We all are aware of the many challenges that face our country and our world: economic downtown, global heating, war, increasing tension in the national and international arenas. Amidst all of this we want to believe that things can be better. Perhaps our vote, our candidate – whomever we choose – can make a difference. When we think not only about elections, but about a world that seems to be straining at its seams in so many ways, why do we continue to hope? Should we?

The Jewish answer is a resounding yes. But that's only if we understand the Jewish conception of what it means to hope. And so this morning let's take a closer look together.

In his wonderful essay, [Future Tense](#) (Jewish Chronicle, April 2008), Sir Jonathan Sacks, The Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of Great

Britain argues that hope is a Jewish attribute - in fact, that it is one of Judaism's gifts to the world. He makes four interwoven and persuasive points in his essay. First, Rabbi Sacks reminds us of a key moment in the biblical narrative when God reveals God's self to Moses at the burning bush. Moses asks to know God's name. God replies that God should be known as "aheyeh asher eheyeh." In the words of Rabbi Sacks:

Non-Jewish translations read this to mean, 'I am what (or who, or that) I am.' Some render it, 'I am: that is who I am', or 'I am the One who is'. These are deeply significant mistranslations.

The phrase means, literally, 'I will be what I will be', or more fundamentally, God's name belongs to the future tense. [God's call is to *that which is not yet*. If we fail to understand this, we will miss the very thing that makes Judaism unique.

Rabbi Sacks's second point is that this theological focus on potentiality, on becoming, on pointing us toward the future is echoed in the very structure of our biblical narrative. As he notes, the Torah always points us forward, to a promise absolutely made but not yet fulfilled: Abraham does not live to see his descendants become a great nation, and

yet he is sure it will happen. Moses' journey ends before the people enter the Promised Land. Tanach begins with a beginning, but it does not end with an ending: The final book of our sacred canon, Second Chronicles, leaves us with Israel in exile in Babylonia after the destruction of the First Temple, but with a promise from Cyrus, king of Persia, that the Israelites will be able to return to their homeland.

So we see that the Jewish conception of God and the structure of biblical narrative point us toward the future. As Rabbi Sacks notes, a third fundamental expression of this idea is in the rabbinic idea of the world to come:

...Judaism is *the only civilization whose golden age is in the future*: the messianic age, the age of peace when 'nation will not lift up sword against nation' and '[Adonay] shall be one and [God's] name One.' This ultimately was the dividing line between Judaism and Christianity. To be a Jew is to reply to the question 'Has the messiah come?' with the words 'Not yet.'

So far, we have considered the Jewish conception of God, the

structure of biblical narrative, and our conception of the time to come. But where we really see Judaism's innovation of hope is in our understanding of the nature of morality, and of the relationship between people and God. As an illustration, consider our story of human origins and human nature – the story of Adam and Eve – in comparison to the Greek myth of Pandora.

According to the ancient Greeks, Prometheus, the Titan or half man / half god, steals the knowledge of fire from the gods and gives it to humans. This makes humans nearly as powerful as gods. The gods then punish Prometheus, sentencing him to eternal torment. More importantly, they create Pandora, the first woman, and send her to Earth with an urn (which many of us probably recall as "Pandora's box"). On arriving, Pandora opens the urn, and lets every variety of trouble and pain out into what was formerly paradise. Only Hope remains in the urn.

In the Pandora story, the forbidden knowledge that is the property of the gods is fire – that is, raw power. People are essentially passive, indeed nearly invisible: it's a Titan, a half-god, who brings fire to humans. The gods create and send Pandora. Humans are merely the object of all of this activity. And so, one wonders: Is the "hope" left in Pandora's urn a

comfort to offset all of the evils that have been set loose in the world? Or, in a chaotic world ruled by capricious gods, is “hope” just a misguided belief that things might be better? If so, it is simply a source of more anguish – the final evil remaining in Pandora’s urn.

In contrast, consider the Eden story. The knowledge that is uniquely God’s at the beginning of the story is the knowledge of good and evil - *moral* power. And, the lesson of Adam and Eve is that people are active participants in their world, capable of making good choices and poor choices. Judaism understands the tasting of the fruit of the forbidden tree not as a catastrophic “Fall,” but as the essential completion of humanity. To live in the world with the knowledge of good and evil, and the capacity to choose, is to be fully human.

“Hope” in the Pandora story may be seen either as small comfort in an overwhelmingly chaotic and evil world, or, even worse, as the most misleading and futile feeling of all. Jewish hope, on the other hand, is an insistence that we are not insignificant, not merely supplicants to indifferent deities. We are given free will, and can choose to be partners with God in tending to the repair of the world.

That human free will is the essence of Jewish hope is Dr. Sacks's fourth and fundamental point. It is echoed by the eminent American Rabbi Harold Schulweis, who writes:

"Like no other tradition, for a believing Jew to believe in God is to believe in the moral potentiality of the human being, created in God's image. The two are linked, connected, for Jews: God and [people], [humanity] is the shadow of God on earth. So, for a Jew to believe in God is to believe in [humankind], and to believe in this world that must not be abandoned."

We should not, Rabbi Schulweis, cautions, make the mistake of being comforted by the false hope of "cheap faith" or "passive faith" when faced with the often despairing reality of violence, greed, and environmental crisis that we see in the daily paper. Schulweis says:

"That is not faith. That is laziness. Cheap faith is irresponsible. Irresponsible because I look to blame someone or anyone. Pass the buck up to God! Active faith replies, 'The buck stops here.' Active faith doesn't ask tirelessly 'Where is God?' without

first asking, "Where am I? Where are we?" It does not ask "Why did God not intervene? Without first asking, "Why don't we intervene?"

An article caught my eye in a recent Sunday Times. It had a despairing title, *At Conference on the Risks to Earth, Few Are Optimistic* (New York Times, August 23, 2008). More than 120 scientists from around the world gathered in Italy for the 40<sup>th</sup> annual conference on planetary emergencies. Among the topics discussed: cyberterrorism, climate change, nuclear weapons, pandemics, and the world's lagging energy supply. The article made sure to note that the wines served at meals were personally and expertly selected by the lead Italian scientist convening the effort. One would think that good wine was a necessity to provide some cheer to the end of gloomy conference days. But what struck me most about the article was its conclusion:

The daunting nature of the problems did not seem to blunt the experts' determination to look for answers.

“What option do I have?” said Richard Wilson, 82, a Harvard physicist and an expert on nuclear power and environmental risk. “I could go down to Hilton Head and take a little club and knock a ball around the course, but I don’t find that a very attractive thought.”

In the face of problems of global proportions, an 82 year old scientist still seeks answers and refuses to retire to the golf course. He has what Schulweiss might term an active faith. And in active faith there is hope. To hope is to keep working, searching, reaching out, connecting, doing God’s work in the world. Jewish hope stems not from a belief in divine rescue, but in human potential endowed from the moment of our creation. We see the traces of God in the good and right acts that people can do.

I find hope in every expression of active faith that I witness in this sacred community:

- Every time one of you responds to the illness or suffering of another through the work of our Caring Committee with a visit, call or meal
- Every time one of you pitches in and volunteers to teach our children at the Religious school, or volunteered to help sponsor an activity so

our kids could learn life-affirming Jewish values and lessons

- Every time you help to make a minyan at the synagogue or at the home of someone sitting shivah
- Every time you help facilitate the ritual life of our synagogue so that we can come together to pray in community, and be supported by one another in our spiritual searching and struggles
- Every time you quietly make a donation to my discretionary fund to help those in need with health insurance, housing, clothing, and other basic necessities
- Every time you reach out to those in need – as when you brought in notebooks, pencils, and warm clothing to be part of our outreach during the Inter-Faith Council's Homeless Connect Initiative
- Every kind of assistance you are offering as the Kehillah sponsors a Burmese refugee family, and helps them to create a new, more hopeful life for themselves and their children
- Every time you help to build our interfaith social justice initiative by sending an e-mail, attending a meeting, doing organizing or research

And here let me mention that Kehillah members were among 100 individuals from over 15 faith institutions who showed up at a County Commissioners' meeting just two weeks before Rosh Hashanah. That effort was successful at getting the Rogers Road neighborhood – a historically low-income, minority neighborhood – removed from the site list for the new solid waste transfer station.

- In sum, each time you respond to the call for involvement in this community and beyond –

In each one of these acts and in the countless more that I could mention, I see Judaism's vision of hope at play in the world.

You will not find an explicit requirement to "hope" among the Ten Commandments, nor indeed anywhere in scripture. No one claims that "Thou shalt believe in the future" is one of the 613 mitzvot. And yet, every mitzvah we fulfill, every notion of righteous and compassionate action that we have is grounded in hope – in the belief that we can make a difference, that mitzvot matter, that in choosing and acting we become partners with God in shaping the future.

So as we join together at the turn of the year, we see around us a

world that is, indeed, full of challenges. We pray for the strength to create hope through our actions, the vision to express our faith by our deeds. In doing so, may we live lives of blessing, meaning, and inspiration. May it be for all of us a shanah tovah, a year of goodness and hope.