

***Elul* Week 4: Hope and Peace**

Dear Friends,

Over these past weeks, we've built something together. We began with listening—the discipline of truly hearing one another. We moved to the courage and loyalty we owe one another and ourselves. Last week, we learned that holiness itself is plural—that we become holy not alone, but together, through the everyday acts of kindness, patience, gratitude, and generosity we offer one another.

This week, as *Elul* draws toward its close and the shofar's call grows nearer, we arrive at the pillar that has quietly stood beneath everything we've discussed so far: **hope**.

It is easy to mistake hope for a feeling—something that either shows up or doesn't, like weather. But if the last three weeks have taught us anything, it's that the things that matter most in Jewish life are not feelings we wait for. They're practices we choose. Listening is a practice. Loyalty is a practice. Holiness is a practice. And hope, it turns out, is a practice too.

Hope is not the same as optimism. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks drew that distinction sharply: optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better on its own. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make it better. Optimism asks nothing of us. Hope asks everything of us—Sacks called it the harder virtue, the one that takes courage rather than the one that takes none.

That distinction matters because hope is also not the same as acceptance. Judaism has never asked us to make peace with what's wrong by simply enduring it. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that we are closer to God when we're asking questions than when we think we have all the answers.

There's a story about the physicist Isidor Rabi, who credited his success to his mother—not because she checked his answers, but because every day she asked him a different question: not “What did you learn?” but “What did you ask?”

That's a Jewish instinct as much as a parenting one. We don't hope by accepting things as they are. We hope by asking what could be different and then acting on the answer.

So, the real question isn't whether the world can move from hatred toward peace. It's where that movement actually begins.

Rarely at the center of a conflict—the place where a wound is deepest—is usually the last place it heals, not the first. Peace tends to take root somewhere adjacent: in a friendship, a classroom, a conversation between neighbors, a congregation like this one.

We build it in the places where it can grow, and trust that what grows there will eventually reach further than we can see.

That is what Hillel meant when he taught that it is not enough to want peace, or even to pray for it—we are called to **“love peace and actively pursue peace”** (Avot 1:12).

He didn’t say pursue it there, at the center of the wound. He said pursue it—which leaves room for the truth that the pursuing usually happens somewhere else entirely, in the ordinary places we already stand.

Standing there is not the end of the work—it’s the beginning of it.

Rabbi Sacks writes that one of Judaism’s most distinctive ideas is that God invites us to become **“partners in the work of creation.”** We are not meant to wait for peace to arrive, the way we might wait for good weather. We are asked to help make it, the way a partner helps build something that neither person could build alone.

The God who gave us freedom, Sacks wrote, asks us in turn to honor and enhance the freedom of others.

That is a fairly precise instruction, once you sit with it: **hope becomes real the moment it turns into responsibility for someone else’s wellbeing, not just our own.**

And perhaps that responsibility becomes especially important when fear or distrust tempts us to retreat into the safety of our own communities. There is good reason, especially in difficult times, to seek the company of those who understand us. But hope asks something more of us. It asks us to keep building relationships across the boundaries that separate us—to listen to people whose experiences may be different from our own, to resist easy assumptions, and to make room for trust where distrust might otherwise take hold.

That doesn’t mean ignoring real differences or pretending that hatred doesn’t exist. It means refusing to allow hatred to have the final word about who we are willing to know.

Sometimes the work of peace begins simply by seeing another person not as a representative of a group, but as a person.

There is something moving about the song **“One Hand, One Heart”** from *West Side Story*, where two people reach toward one another across a divide that their communities have made almost impossible to cross. The larger conflict hasn’t disappeared. But something different becomes possible because two people are willing to see one another differently.

That is one way peace begins.

Wishing you *Shanah tovah, u'metukah*, a good and sweet year.

Warmly,

Alan