

The world is in tumult. The world is always in tumult. But right now, it feels more tumultuous than usual. Unsettled. Unpredictable. Even scary.

These are not unfamiliar feelings to us Jews. We have known worse. But even from the darkest of moments, sometimes, something transcendent emerges. Hope.

A man sat in jail. His crime was treason. He had publicly defied the ruler, accusing him of conduct that would undermine the nation, conduct already leading to destruction. The man was not wrong. But, in jail, in Jerusalem, two thousand seven hundred years ago, he sat.

King Zedekiah ruled. He would be the last king. Zedekiah was a puppet of the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, who placed him on the throne, and whose armies were already laying siege to Jerusalem. Jeremiah, the harshest, the downright nastiest of our prophets, called Zedekiah out for being a coward, a heretic, and appeaser, all which he was. Zedekiah threw Jeremiah in prison.

Imagine how Jeremiah felt while he sat in his cell. He had prophesied correctly. So what. If the King did not get him, the Babylonians would. The nation was lost.

One day, he had a visitor. Cousin Hanamel arrived from their home village of Anathoth, where a field Hanamel owned was now in foreclosure. "Jeremiah," he said, "you are the next in line to redeem this land. Please. Buy it." Jeremiah, in jail, Jeremiah, hated by his own king, Jeremiah, a scourge of the Babylonians about to take over everything...and now he is going to buy property?

He does not have to. But he agrees. He pays Hanamel seventeen shekels of silver. He writes a deed, seals it, has it witnessed. He gives the documents to a kinsman and instructs him, "take these documents and put them into an earthen jar, so that they may last a long, long time."

Soon, Zedekiah fell and the Babylonians swarmed: Jerusalem was razed, the Temple destroyed, the Israelites exiled to Babylon. Jeremiah, the prophet, foresaw all this. He knew what would happen. But. On the eve of destruction and exile, he performs what would become the paradigmatic act of Jewish hope. He purchases a field in Anathoth.

Thirty five years ago, my teacher, Professor Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi of Columbia, one of the great Jewish historians of the twentieth century, delivered a lecture in Paris with the English title, *Toward a History of Jewish Hope; A Field in Anathoth*. Paris was the right setting. French historians were the first to emphasize what we might call social history. They were less concerned with names, and dates, and places. They wanted to know, “how did it feel?”

Yerushalmi intended to write a complete history of Jewish hope, a seminal scholarly work and a guide to the Jew of today how generations before us kept hope alive. He collected sacred texts, rabbinic responsa, personal diaries, even poetry, documents reflective of Jewish resilience in dark moments, where hope endured.

We may not realize it, but we know some of these words. “Next year in Jerusalem!” “On that day the Lord shall be one and his name one.” “If you will it, it is no dream.”

Hope could even be found in that darkest moment of our own age.

We have spoken of Victor Frankl, the eminent Austrian psychiatrist who in 1942 was taken into custody and deported to Theresianstadt. He followed a path too well known, and aside from a sister, was the only member of his family to survive.

During the war, Frankl saw all it all. Cruelty and sadism and terror. But he also learned something. It became his cause. Meaning. Even in the camps, those who were able to generate some kind of meaning in their lives were often the able to withstand all that was unimaginable.

Frankl was a prisoner like any other, but in some section of his mind, the scientist in him took over. The scientist scrutinized others, examined their behavior, sought motivations for that behavior, and attempted to draw logical, rational conclusions from his observations.

Even in that hell on earth, Frankl saw individuals who went about their days with a sense of meaning, who, even there, had lives worth living, who even then, lived with a sense of hope. The meaning of “meaning,” the attempt to maintain Jewish

rituals and prayer. Keeping images of loved ones before one's eyes, keeping strong for their sake. Looking out for the weaker and more endangered. As Frankl concluded, the best possible lives, were those that had meaning. And even in a concentration camp, if there was meaning...there was hope.

Mark and Luba Schonwetter have been members here for nearly forty years. Daughter Isabella, now a Temple officer, became a Bat Mitzvah on this bimah, where her sons, Jason and Jared, became B'nei Mitzvah.

Mark tells his story often: his boyhood in a Polish village, his father taken away by the Nazis, never to be seen again; he and his mother and his sister in hiding for months on end, in a crawlspace, hardly any food, literally, scraping by. Every day, their lives were in danger. I have heard Mark tell the story many times. Every time, I have trouble believing it was real.

When the war ended, Mark remained in Poland. A Jew in Poland in the 1950s...one can only imagine. In 1957 he went to Israel, and four years later, here.

I remember the first time I met Mark. He was one of the warmest, most cheerful, kindest people I had ever encountered. He made it seem like meeting me was one of the crowning achievements of his life. I wish it were, but I know that's how he makes everybody feel.

How can he be that way? After what he went through...how? Had someone described Mark's background, I would have expected an individual quiet, cautious, fearful, limited. That's not Mark.

Fifteen years ago, Mark's mother, Sala, died in Israel. At the shiva, I asked him to tell me about her. His eyes filled with tears when he spoke of her. She was the one, he said. She kept Mark and his sister going. With her love and her words and her kindness and at times even her sternness. She made hope ever present. She would not allow them to feel defeated. She chose to have hope. She insisted upon it. She purchased her field in Anatoth.

Mark is no Pollyana. He knows better than any of the rest of us that the world is a place where horrible things do happen. But even more, he knows, that hope can be so very, very powerful.

Hope, at times, is something that can be handed to us. But Sala of blessed memory teaches us that we can create hope, we can nurture it, we can demand it be with us. We can choose to have hope.

Each Passover we move all the furniture out of the first floor of our house. Our record is twenty-seven people. We sing and pray and, of course, eat. And we talk. I pass out historical texts on Passover-related themes – subjugation, tyranny, freedom. We read them and discuss. You have to participate. You don't join in, you get called out.

One night last year the conversation grew lively and wandered far afield. We began to talk about the impact of attitude on illness. If an ill person, and his or her family, embrace a hopeful attitude, does that make a difference? Opinions varied. The new-agey types were all over it. The journalists present professionally skeptical. Of the two doctors, one was adamant that encouraging hope facilitated healing. The other said, makes no difference, it is science.

I was a busy referee so I just prodded others. But the next day I recalled surgeon Atul Gawande's *On Being Mortal*. Gawande explores what he sees as our obsession with immortality, which he believes prevents us comes at the cost of our embracing mortality; we strive for something that cannot be; we miss out on making what we have at hand truly great.

Attitude does make a difference. I do not know if it affects the science. But I know this. I have been with many families dwelling with adversity. The moments are inconsistent. I have seen instances where what no one would call a true tragedy is treated as a calamity. That is a choice people make.

More often, I have seen individuals stand up straight, embrace one another, proceed forward, even sad, even scared, but with hope. Because they understand that, with hope, the best that can possibly be, will be theirs.

Every family has its stories, mine included. I shared part of this story last year. In 1966, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was 44 years old. By the time the diagnosis was made, it was too late for surgery. The route ahead was unclear, but the outcome was known. My father was a doctor. He understood. His wife, the mother of his four children, passed away two years later.

It but would be nearly four decades before this was a subject we could discuss. (Every family has its story, right?) The why is unimportant, but now I was nearing fifty years old and I had always wanted to know...those two years...what were they like?

We were sitting in my father's house in Florida. He thought for a moment. He responded, at the beginning, it was everything you could imagine: shock, horror, devastation. We quickly learned there was no medical treatment that would help, just palliative care as it became necessary. We dealt with all the moving pieces that had to be dealt with. Made decisions. And from then on, it was a matter of loving each other, loving you and your siblings, and waiting.

And then he added. "I know this will sound weird, but from then on, often, it wasn't bad. We weren't after a miracle. That wasn't going to happen. But we hoped for the best we could receive, and that's what we got. Days ahead filled with being together, achieving a new depth in our relationship, understanding one another with unprecedented intimacy. We talked endlessly of the paths the four of you would take. It was sad, oh was it sad. But we decided it was more than that. Every day, we had hope.

My parents purchased a field in Anatoth.

From Jeremiah, from Victor Frankl, Mark Schonwetter, my parents, from so many amazing individuals whose lives I have been privileged to share for so many years, I have learned this: Anatoth is so often a choice. We cannot control everything, but there is so much we can. To embrace hope, to create hope, is something we can choose.

Next month, I hope you meet a man named Nabeel Abboud-Ashkaar. Nabeel is an Israeli Arab, a Christian. He began violin studies at age 8, and graduated from

Tel Aviv University with a double major in physics and music. From there it was to Germany, to Rostock, to Master's studies at the Hochschule fer Musik.

A decade ago, Nabeel left his European career as a concert violinist, returned to Israel, and founded the Polyphony Conservatory in his hometown of Nazareth. There, Jewish and Arab students study and play together, taught by Jewish and Arab teachers, many of whom are musicians in the Israel Philharmonic.

Polyphony is a serious place. The high school age students are headed for college at world class conservatories and careers as classical musicians. They are like serious young musicians anywhere. They study hard. They practice many hours every day. Music is their passion.

They know Polyphony is not like other music schools. The student body is indeed uniquely diverse. But to these students, Jew and Arab alike, that is far less interesting than the music they make.

October 15 we and the JCC sponsor a concert by a string quartet of senior Polyphony students. Nabeel will introduce them. They will first play Dvorak's "American" quartet. I love this piece and will quickly be caught up in the music. But at the same time, I know that I, and every person in that theater, will be keenly aware that, perhaps, perhaps, what we see that afternoon is indeed the future.

Nabeel created hope, and placed it on that stage before us. An Israeli Arab, he bought a field in Anatoth.

I had intended to close here, with a few appropriate and hopefully stirring lines. But just this morning, I remembered that an old friend would be with us, a friend who so much of what I have tried to convey.

On a trip to Moscow 28 years ago, part of a different life, I met a Refusenik named Alexander Smukler. Sasha. Not long after Sasha and his wife and their two young sons came to the United States. Their first home, the top floor of a three family house, was literally around the corners from us. Maybe coincidence, maybe b'shert. We have been friends a long time.

The Smuklers worked hard. Sasha's business career flourished and over the ensuing decades he achieved success. His Jewish identity remains fundamental to who he is. He is committed to his roots, an international activist on behalf of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewry, and for the last decade, President of the National Council Supporting Eurasian Jewry, which our member Stephen Greenberg also served, as chairman.

But it was the Sasha I met years ago, and came to know during the early days in America, that touched me. Like other young Russian Jews, he chose to "come out," risking imprisonment or worse to learn about his own background, study Hebrew, understand what it was to be a Jew, and truly become a Jew. This was dangerous.

I asked him years ago, "Why did you do this? You could so easily have ended up like so many others, never heard from again," and we all know that is true. He responded, "I had no choice. I could not abandon what I hoped lay ahead."

He was, in the words of the prophet Zachariah, "a prisoner of hope." He purchased a field in Anathoth.

Hatikvah, "the hope," Israel's national anthem. The nineteen year old Naftali Herz Imber wrote original poem in a village in what is now Ukraine, in 1877, a full two decades before the first Zionist Congress.

This is important. Because while Hatikvah was adapted by the early Zionists and was and is a stirring and glorious hymn for the movement toward a Jewish state, it began as something broader, expressing a hope for the land, but more, for the unity of the Jewish people, for our safety, for our wellbeing, for the fulfillment of our destiny. Imber's words resound because they touch the very core of the Jew: A Jew is one who has hope.

The world is a tumultuous place. But there is a field for sale in Anathoth. Let's buy it.

Shana Tova.