Yom Kippur 5777 – Yearning for Paradise
Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald
Congregation HEA

One of my friends once jokingly lamented that God perhaps should have given the Jewish people a different homeland rather than the land of Israel – a tiny desert country with very little water, no oil, and surrounded by hostile neighbors. “Wouldn’t it be great,” he said, “if God had instead given us… Hawaii?! After all, Hawaii is a lush paradise; and, as an island, we wouldn’t have to worry about security!” To which I quipped: “It wouldn’t work… you’re forgetting about the indigenous Hawaiians. We’d be in the same predicament and we’d still be at war with the PLO: the Polynesian Liberation Organization!”

All kidding aside, I wouldn’t trade *Eretz Yisrael* for any place on earth – it is the homeland of our people, rich with the history and culture of our ancestors. But I’ll admit, it’s never been an easy place. Hawaii certainly seems more idyllic. Nonetheless, was not on my list of vacation destinations.

But apparently Hawaii was on my son Koby’s list. When Koby was in the hospital this summer, we were contacted by the Make a Wish Foundation, offering to grant Koby a wish. We talked to Koby about this incredible gift and asked him if there was anything he would want to wish for. Koby still wasn’t communicating very fluidly and he did his best answering “yes or no” questions. So Melanie and I went through a list of our suggestions: “Do you want to go to Disney World? Do you want to meet a celebrity? Would you want to go to Europe?” To every question he shook his head no. Finally he searched his mind and found the word he was grasping for: “Hawaii.” Koby wanted to go to Hawaii.

At first I was somewhat perplexed. Why Hawaii? We’ve never talked about Hawaii. So I probed… “Let’s take a step back, Koby,” thinking that perhaps I could redirect him. “Let’s start with a more basic question: what is most important to you in life? What do you care about most?” Open ended questions weren’t easy for him, but he responded immediately: “Mommy and Abba.”

“What else?”

“Hannah and Micah.”

“And what is it about Hawaii that makes you want to go there?”

After some thought he said: “Pretty.”
And then it dawned on me: he’s absolutely right! After everything we’ve been through, Hawaii was the perfect wish: Just a pretty place where we can get a respite from this crazy life we’ve been leading. A place to which we can retreat and experience beauty, wonder, and tranquility. A place where we can make some memories together as a family. In a word: Paradise.

Paradise is not to be underrated. And paradise is also a sacred idea. The Torah teaches us that humanity was born into paradise – an idyllic place free from concerns. But the Garden of Eden was not to be. We can’t live there, because paradise is where nothing can change, nothing happens, just a perfect static non-temporal existence. In order to truly be free and enter a covenantal relationship with God, other people, and the world, we had to leave the Garden. But our tradition reminds us constantly that Paradise is a real thing. It may not be a place – but it’s a powerful idea. It’s the idea that this world and this life can be made better.

Judaism teaches that Shabbat and the Festivals are a taste of Paradise, a reminder of where we came from and where we belong. Six days a week we toil to eke out a life from this flawed world; but, once a week, and on our holidays, we live as if. We try to experience the world as if it were the Garden of Eden – a time that is free of struggle and sorrow. If we’ve prepared well, it is a day on which we experience abundance and leisure. It doesn’t always look that way in practice, but Shabbat and the holidays are meant to remind us of how the life ought to be and to entice us to long for a more perfect world.

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke to you about the importance of living in the present moment – of saying “hineini” – “Here I am” to life. Living in the now is vital, because the present moment is all we really have control over. But, as we all know, you can’t just live perpetually in the present, you also have to look to the future. Yet, how do you look to the future with hopefulness when times are tough.

When people ask me how I’m doing, the most concise and honest answer I can give is that as long as I stay focused on the present moment, I’m alright. As soon as I step out of the present in either direction, that’s when it’s hard. Yet, the truth is, it is an issue for all of us. You don’t need to look to my family to understand that circumstances out of our control can throw our world into chaos. So on this day when we are supposed to reflect on the year that has passed and make resolutions for the year ahead, I want to reflect on hope, ideals, and the future.
I’ve learned that there is a critical difference between hope and optimism. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain’s modern orthodox community describes the difference this way:

“Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist – only a certain naïveté – but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope.”

I describe my experience of the last several months like looking through the wrong side of a pair of binoculars. When you look through binoculars the right way, they help you see what is in the distance. If you turn them around and look through the big lenses, the world looks small and narrow. That’s how life has felt this year.

But I learned something from our experience with the Make A Wish Foundation. When you think of Make A Wish, what comes to mind are kids with serious illnesses going on trips to Disneyworld or Hawaii, meeting famous celebrities, or having experiences like skydiving. Make A Wish is an incredible organization whose generosity and compassion seem endless. My family and I had a great time in Hawaii. We enjoyed it thoroughly and it really was a dream come true for Koby. But the most valuable and precious thing Make A Wish gives is the gift of hope. It is the gift of turning the binoculars around once more.

Long before we touched down in Honolulu or dipped our toes in the warm water of Waikiki Beach, Make A Wish gave us a priceless gift. It was the gift of having something to look forward to – a goal to work for; a dream. It was sitting on the couch with Koby leafing through the travel guides. It was staying up at night researching handicap accessible beaches. It was talking with the kids about what we most looked forward to in Hawaii. It was the gift to dream in a time in our life when dreaming feels dangerous.

Since returning from Hawaii, we’ve learned to set small milestones for ourselves and plan events that we can look forward to as a family. We now ask ourselves: “What is the next thing we’re living for?”
I’ve come to understand that dreams are not a luxury for when times are good. Dreams, ideals, paradise are central to the human experience. They feed our soul. Unfortunately, many of us as Jews, have been – for good historical reason – conditioned to see the glass as 1/16th empty. We hedge our bets. We prepare for the worst. We dampen our joy, lest we tempt the ayn ha-rah – the “evil eye.” (tu, tu, tu!).

In the Torah reading for Yom Kippur, we learn about the ancient ritual of the scapegoat. Once a year, on Yom Kippur, the High Priest would undergo a lengthy process of self-purification and repentance. He then would take two identical goats and draw lots to designate one as an offering for God and the other to be sent into the wilderness with the sins of Israel symbolically placed upon it.

Now, it’s easy to dismiss this too as superstition and magical thinking. But I would argue that religious ritual is not hocus pocus. Ritual is a dramatization of human yearning. In this case, it is our longing for hope; the yearning to believe that we can indeed be cleansed of sin, that forgiveness is possible; that we can renew our lives if we really try. Without it we would remain stuck in our sin.

Hope propels us forward as human beings. In order to improve as people, we have to believe in the possibility of better.

What is true for us as individuals is also true for a society. A family, a community, a country also needs ideals and hope. The challenges that we face together are daunting. It’s tempting to throw our hands up in the face of war, terrorism, poverty, inequality, racial injustice, the plight of refugees, and the devastation of global climate change. The list goes on; and perhaps you have a different list… doesn’t matter. The point is, if we don’t believe that these things can get better; if we don’t have hope that people can come together to solve these problems, our cynicism becomes self-fulfilling. Realism and pragmatism are important… but we also need dreamers.

A couple of weeks ago we mourned the passing of a great dreamer – Shimon Peres. At age 93, Shimon Peres was the last of Israel’s founding generation. Shimon Peres was a complex figure with his share of failings; but perhaps his greatest contribution to Israeli society was to promote a hopeful vision of Israel. He was Israel’s “Dreamer Laureate.”

A few years ago, Shimon Peres was asked if he felt old. He responded: The way to know if you are young or old is to count up your accomplishments and your dreams. If your
accomplishments outnumber your dreams, you are old. If your dreams outnumber your accomplishments, you are young. By that measure, Shimon Peres died a young man.

We need dreamers like Shimon Peres. We need people who speak to our aspirations rather than our fears.

The prophet Isaiah, whom we read in the Haftarah of Yom Kippur reminds us that symbolic atonement through ritual is not enough if it is not accompanied by righteous action and justice. Isaiah rebukes our arrogance and cynicism and hypocrisy when we fast on Yom Kippur with earnest piety while simultaneously being indifferent to the suffering of others. He asks in righteous indignation:

“Is such the fast [God] desires? A day for people to starve their bodies? No, this is the fast God desires: to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free… It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and do not ignore your fellow human being. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn, and your healing spring up quickly!”

Hope is not wishful thinking, it is the audacity to strive for better when despair and cynicism are the easier choice.

The late British Rabbi Hugo Gryn was a child in Auschwitz. The holiday of Hanukkah came, and after fashioning a makeshift menorah, his father melted his precious margarine ration to light a wick for the first night. The young Hugo, outraged, protested to his father. How could he use the food which sustained them in the midst of such horror, just to observe the holiday? His father gently instructed him: “My child, you and I have seen that it is possible to live three weeks without food. We once lived almost three days without water. But you cannot live properly for three minutes without hope.”

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1 Isaiah 58
2 Hugo Gryn, “Three Minutes of Hope”
Besides helping us improve our lives and our world, we need hope to feed our souls. Hope is an act of faith that keeps our spirits alive. My greatest teacher in hope and courage has been our son Koby. He is the strongest, most resilient, most courageous person I’ve ever met. Koby has faced down his challenges like no one I’ve ever seen. He inspires me every day to believe and to hold out hope for the future.

I’ve learned that when we stop hoping, that’s when our soul starts dying. Believe me, hoping is the most dangerous thing I do these days, but I’m determined not to die while I am still alive. The truth is, every year on Yom Kippur, each of us is forced to turn the binoculars around for a moment and see our lives through the small narrow opening of our short existence. On Yom Kippur we look at ourselves through the lens of eternity. Yet the lesson of Yom Kippur is not morbid. It is to bring into focus the preciousness of life and the need to make the best of the time we have; to strive for better, to dream, to hope.

On Yom Kippur we recite Yizkor for the ones we love who have left this world. In fact, the practice of Yizkor originates in Yom Kippur. At Yizkor we bring to mind mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, grandparents, dear friends, and even children. I want to believe – I need to believe – that there is a world beyond this one: one that is more ideal, more at peace, more whole, less broken; a world in which there is no war, there is no lack and where no one is hungry; a world without violence, without disease, without sorrow, and without death. More than ever, I need to believe that there is a place where we will be together again with those we love. I don’t know where we go from here, but I think it serves us well to believe that it is paradise.

Humanity was born into paradise, but we were destined to live in the real world, a world of struggle and challenges.

A rabbinic legend teaches that Adam and Eve sinned on the same day they were created, late on Friday afternoon. Not wishing to expel Adam and Eve as Shabbat was about to begin, God allowed them to experience one Shabbat in paradise.

As Shabbat came to a close Adam and Eve despaired. Watching the sun sinking over the horizon, they felt as though the entire world was plunged into darkness on account of their transgression. So God taught them the secret of making fire. God gave them two flint stones – one was named darkness and the other stone was named death. As night fell, God instructed them how to strike the two stones together to produce a spark and ignite a flame,
illuminating the path out of paradise. Together they prayed: “Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, borei me’orei ha-esh” “Blessed are you God, who creates the lights of the flame.”

Adam and Eve took the knowledge of fire with them into the world to warm themselves, to cook their food, and to illuminate the darkness of night. We say this blessing every Saturday night at Havdalah, marking the end of Shabbat and the beginning of our work week. We also say this blessing at the conclusion of Yom Kippur. It is customary to hold our hands up to the flames to see the light and its shadows.

The world we live in isn’t paradise, but God gave us the capacity to knock darkness and death against one another to make our own light, to illuminate the shadows, to keep us warm, to sustain us and to make it possible for us to see one another.

At the conclusion of this Yom Kippur, when we light the candle at the end of Neillah, let us hold our hands up to its light and imagine God’s light reflected in the work of our hands this coming year. Let us leave the sanctuary with lofty plans and ambitious ideals for our future. Let us create goals for ourselves that propel us forward. Let us resolve to create our own light and illuminate a dark world with hope.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah – May we be sealed in the book of life for a good year – a year of light and hope.

A video recording of this sermon is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3BNQQOu4e4&feature=youtu.be (sermons begins at 1:03).

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1 Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 20