

Finding Faith in a Subway Station.
Rabbi David M. Frank, Temple Solel, Cardiff, CA

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In 2007, the Washington Post conducted an interesting experiment. Some of you may have heard about it. On a Friday morning, in the midst of rush hour, the famous violin prodigy, Joshua Bell, performed in a Washington DC subway station. For 43 minutes, the young musician, dressed in jeans and baseball cap, played some of the most complicated music ever written on his \$3.5 million Stradivarius. Over 1,000 people walked past this brilliant subway musician. And in that time, only 7 actually stopped to listen, while his open violin case collected a whopping sum of \$32.17. This is the same Joshua Bell who has played before the heads of Europe, who won the Avery Fisher prize as the best classical musician in America, and who regularly packs concert halls at \$100 apiece for a so-so seat.

It got me thinking about the power and importance of perception. Based on the way we look at something, we not only decide whether to stop and listen to a subway musician, but we make critical decisions that can affect the course of our lives.

Given the climate we're living in today, this seems especially important. The last couple of years have created so much uncertainty. It's indeed frightening when the stock market freefalls almost 1,000 points in less than an hour, as it did last May, due to a trading algorithm gone manic. In fact, almost anything can cause panic these days, and usually does just about every time some piece of negative economic news hits the wires. Certainly, no one is ready to predict when a recovery will actually take hold. We're riding this thing out on a rough road with blind curves ahead.

At the same time, many of us are seriously concerned about what the future holds for our children or grandchildren. As competition increases for colleges, and the job market shrinks, a new generation is wondering if they'll ever be able to reach the same standard of living they grew up with.

Psychologically, if not practically, we're holding back, tightening up, lowering our expectations and trying to prepare for the worst, if it should happen. And of course, as I've spoken about before, to many of our families, the worst already has happened. Pay cuts, job loss, devalued pensions, debilitating competition that has demoralized our children before they even get out of the starting gate. This is our world today.

"Yes we can" is a distant echo; "maybe we can" is a hope; and "what if we can't" is a real fear that keeps us up at night.

Over these 25 hours of Yom Kippur, many of us will sift through these disturbing doubts and insecurities. We say: U'netaneh token kedushat ha-yom – Let us declare the power of this day, it is awesome and daunting! We acknowledge that our very existence is grass that withers, a fading flower, a shattered urn. This is our moment of self-reflection, and I would suggest it can also be our hour of destiny – depending upon how we see ourselves and our circumstances.

Yes, perception matters. It's the difference between a sublime concerto and a subway distraction at morning rush hour. It's the difference between living and surviving.

Dr. Martin Seligman studies such things. He is director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. And his research has led him to some remarkable conclusions. Specifically, he studies the difference between optimists and pessimists – what characterizes them and what effect their outlooks can have on the way they experience life.

Essentially, Dr. Seligman found that the main difference between optimists and pessimists is how they perceive a setback. When something bad happens, optimists will see it as temporary, as limited in scope, and not entirely their own fault. Pessimists, on the other hand, will perceive just the opposite. They tend to consider a setback as permanent, with major ramifications, and entirely their own fault.

So, what difference does perception make? Well, here's the fascinating part of his research. In several large-scale experiments, he found that optimists, simply put, are more successful than pessimists. Optimistic politicians win more elections, optimistic students get better grades, optimistic athletes win more contests, and optimistic salespeople make more money.

Why is this so? Dr. Seligman has concluded it's mainly because optimism and pessimism are both self-fulfilling prophecies! Pessimists feel defeated by their setbacks, which they perceive as formidable & enduring, so are less likely to take constructive action than optimists who, conversely, see their setbacks as only temporary and limited and, therefore, feel more confident they can overcome them.

In other words, our outlook has a big role to play in how we face challenges. Dr. Seligman calls it optimism; Judaism might call it faith. Faith is the hope and the conviction that obstacles can be overcome, that setbacks are not permanent. And it is precisely this faith that has sustained the Jewish people through the centuries. As Jews, we have met every turn of history, and we have endured. No setback has been seen as permanent or so far reaching that it has paralyzed us. Ani ma'amin, said Maimonides – I believe with perfect faith. This is the genius of the Jewish soul – a religious outlook that gives us faith in future possibilities.

Unetaneh Tokef Kedushat Ha-yom – and it is this which gives sacred power to this day. For we can look at the increasing hardship on ourselves and people we love and say – I still believe; I could be an optimist, I can have faith!

I think faith is a concept that has been largely misunderstood. Many view faith as magic. They reduce it to a kind of superstition. In the face of adversity they abandon power over their lives and instead pray to God to fix their troubles. But, as David de Sola Pool, the great 20th century American rabbi taught: "This is a philosophy of surrender, an admission of personal weakness."

In his little gem of a book written in 1966 called, "Is There An Answer?," he describes the true meaning of religious faith. "Faith," he writes, "can sustain our will to positive action and buttress the efforts we are duty bound to make in combating trouble."

In other words, faith is not a desperate surrender to God, but just the opposite – a conviction that we can take all the resources God has entrusted to us and marshal them against our challenges. Faith, when properly deployed, is what gives us the courage to face our hardships and challenges.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once famously wrote: "Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will."

Faith does not come easily - it is something that each of us must continually work to build and rebuild in ourselves – keeping ourselves positive, lifting up our spirits when they fall, and meeting our troubles with optimism instead of pessimism, with hope instead of debilitating fear. Unetaneh Tokef kedushat ha-yom – that is the sacred, transformative power of this day. On Yom Kippur, even in the bleakest of times, our ancestors found hope for the future, and so can we.

The question is, how do we create a positive attitude in ourselves? When we are feeling hopeless in the face of financial loss, or helpless when our children grow anxious or depressed? When we are so low and our troubles are so profoundly real, how is it possible to build faith?

I was deeply affected by an article that appeared last year in the Los Angeles Jewish Journal, in which several prominent L.A. rabbis were interviewed about their cancer diagnoses. I thought each one of them spoke with true honesty and humility, and offered a dimension of faith that we ourselves could build on.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Valley Beth Shalom was diagnosed with colon cancer and, after surgery and chemotherapy, was again diagnosed with liver cancer. Ten years later, he is thankfully cancer-free. Reflecting on lessons learned, he said that trivialities, the small stuff that used to stress him out no longer upsets him or absorbs as much of his emotional energy. For him, life is now more about the big picture, especially since the chance to grow old has been given back to him. Ironically, cancer gave Rabbi Feinstein hope for the future. He said: "The greatest sin is despair. It isn't idolatry or blasphemy. It's to give up on life and on hope and on tomorrow. ...I want to love. I want to live. I want to laugh. And I won't let go."

Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Westwood has faced both a brain tumor as well as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Even though he's currently in remission, there is no cure. Cancer has taught him about blessings. He said: "I don't believe that God guarantees you good health, and I don't believe that getting sick takes away all the many, many blessings that I have."

And Rabbi John Rosove of Temple Israel of Hollywood had a seven month bout with prostate cancer. At a certain point, it seemed advanced and incurable. He said that his cancer didn't fundamentally change him, but it did sharpen his outlook on what he could and could not control in his life. He said: "I've always been aware that I don't have control, ultimately, over anything, and I'm even more aware of that now. The only control we have is our attitude – and choosing life."

So, to summarize, these three rabbis give us some valuable building blocks of faith. Rabbi Feinstein learned to let go of the trivial, to not be stressed by things that used to bother him, and to refuse to give in to the sin of despair. If every difficulty, every challenge and obstacle aggravates and depresses us, we will never build the resolve to rise above them. Rabbi Wolpe discovered that a particular loss does not take away our other blessings – a key to faith is gratitude for what we do have. And Rabbi Rosove found that there will be many things we can't control, but the one thing we can always control is our attitude and the decision to choose life. These hard won lessons of faith are each remarkable examples of what it takes to live with optimism and hope.

Over the years, I have seen a number of our Temple Solel Families experience true tragedy in their lives, and then discover the faith to take them out of their despair.

We have lost a number of our youth in their early 20's. Yes, even here in our little village our children have died tragically of cancer, of drug-overdose, and suicide. I have stood by their graves and asked myself how a parent keeps breathing, wakes up to another day, keeps from falling into a black hole.

And then I have seen how they do it. Eventually, they find courage and then hope. They resolve that their children's memories will be a blessing. They speak to teen groups about drug addiction and tell their children's stories as a cautionary tale. They form a support group of parents who have lost their children to drugs, who then create a project to build self-esteem in homeless, at-risk youth by giving them brand new backpacks filled with school supplies, labeled in loving memory of their child who died of a drug overdose – to promote the message that these students have a choice to be dead or alive. They single handedly form national foundations that bring in thousands of dollars for pediatric cancer research and facilities for kids hospitalized with cancer. They come to the profound realization that they still have blessings in their lives, that they have a hopeful future and can turn their tragedy into good for others. They develop a new faith, a realistic faith, a faith in the human spirit that can break through even the most debilitating losses.

My friends, this is hope. This is optimism. And this is what we all must try to renew in ourselves today. I know that things are depressing right now. And they are likely to stay this way for a while longer. Home values and investments are not going to come back over night. The job market has a long recovery ahead. And our kids face stiff competition in their futures. We all have added pressures, some of us more than others, and the tenor of our country is far from optimistic. But, none of this takes away the blessings we do have. And it's essential for us to build on these and remember that both pessimism and optimism can be self-fulfilling prophecies. On this Yom Kippur, the Unetaneh Tokef urges us to seize the sacred power of this day and rebuild our faith.

Yes, notes Rabbi Gordon Tucker, the Unetaneh Tokef does not shield us from the raw truth. Some losses are deep and permanent – clouds passing by, flowers that fade away forever. But, when we feel ourselves, our lives to be shattered like an urn, we must know that we can pick up the pieces, no matter how broken and how many. Our lives can be put back together, and the urn can be made whole again. As such, says Rabbi Tucker, the Unetaneh Tokef is an “assurance to us of our ability to reconstruct ourselves precisely when our hearts, our cores, are broken.”

This is not a small thing. To get past our disappointments, our failed dreams, our irredeemable losses. To choose hope over despair and turn ourselves into optimists, even in the most difficult of times. Is this realistic? I believe that it is not only realistic, it is essential.

One final story. It is told by temple member Michael Kopiec in his new book, called, “The Unveiling.” On November 7th, 1943, the Szebnie Labor Camp in Poland, where his parents were interned, was liquidated by the Nazis. Hundreds of Jews were taken out to a nearby forest, shot down and massacred. The rest were herded into cattle cars bound for Auschwitz. This is where Michael’s parents met their fate.

The remaining inmates of Szebnie were lined up – men separated from the women and children, about to be loaded onto trains. Just then, pandemonium broke out. Women and children, realizing that their destiny was about to be sealed as their husbands and fathers were ordered to march, were sobbing and crying out for their men. Suddenly, the men all broke ranks and there was nothing the Nazis could do to control the chaos. Searchlights filled the square, the sound of gunfire and barking dogs filled the air, while Nazis wielded batons to pry the men, women, and children apart. Knowing they would likely never see each other again, they ran toward one another for a last tormented embrace.

But Misha Kopiec was not ready to succumb to defeat. He held Michael’s mother, Leah, with a firm grasp, and looked right into her eyes. She later told Michael: “while the people all around us were in the throes of panic and had surrendered to hopelessness, there was not even a hint of fear, sadness or submission in your father’s eyes or on his face. What I saw was defiance! Steely – cold – defiance! And all at once, I was no longer afraid. Even before he spoke a single word, the look on his face and in his eyes erased all of my fear. ‘This is not our end! You are not going to die! I am not going to die! Look into my eyes because I need to know for certain that you believe me. Stay alive, and when this is over, I will never stop looking, and I will find you!’” Then the baton came down on Misha’s shoulders, and then another blow. But Misha never released his gaze. “Stay alive. I will find you, I promise I will find you.”

After Auschwitz, Misha did indeed find his Leah. They never lost hope, they never lost determination, they had faith that as long as the Nazis spared them, they themselves could stay alive to find each other again.

We, too, can have just such faith – as long as we remain courageous, grateful for the blessings we do have, and hopeful that, no matter how shattered, we can rise up and repair our brokenness.

It’s all in the way we see and experience life. Even in these anxious, uncertain times, we can choose to be an optimist or a pessimist, to stop as Joshua Bell plays a grand concerto on his Stradivarius, or walk with resentment around another subway obstacle at morning rush hour. Unetaneh Tokef Kedushat ha-yom – that is the sacred power, and the sacred choice given to us this day. U’vecharta va-chayim – so, let us choose hope, let us choose faith, and let us choose life. Amen.