

Hoping for Salvation

כי לישועתך קיוינו כל היום

For your salvation we hope all day long

Hope. It is such an important part of entering the New Year. And the first line of this song urges us to hope for salvation all day long. All day long? Every day? We all have hopeful moments, moments of beauty or happiness or “flow” when we feel that everything is going in the right direction for ourselves and for the world. But then there are the other moments. How can we maintain our hope in the face of the flaws, the upsets, the challenges, and, sometimes, the moments of tragedy that we see in our individual lives? And how can we maintain that hope when the world around us sometimes seems to be going crazy, locked into destructive patterns that can be hard to trace, let alone reverse? How can we maintain our hope?

First, we need to be clear about what we are hoping for. The prayer says we are to hope for יְשׁוּעָה – a word here translated “salvation” but which could also be translated as “deliverance” or “redemption.” What kind of salvation are we talking about? Context helps, and this line comes from the fifteenth prayer of the weekday Amidah, traditionally said three times each weekday, a prayer that focuses on the idea of מְשִׁיחַ – a messianic age in which the world will be transformed. The prayer asks that the promise of the messianic age be brought to fruition quickly and in our days, and it ends by praising God as the One who causes the light of salvation to dawn. It reflects a debate among the ancient rabbis about when the messianic age will come. Some argue that the timing of such a transformation of the world is completely up to God, and nothing we can do will affect when it happens. Others think it all depends on us; our actions in the world can prepare it for salvation, which would mean that we could make it happen sooner than it otherwise would. It’s possible to read this prayer either way: either we are simply hoping that salvation will come in its own good time or we are urging God to speed its arrival both by our words and by what we do to make it arrive.

The other important thing to realize is that the salvation we are talking about is not an individual kind of thing. The language of individual salvation has become an important concept in Christianity, and as a result, even the use of the word “salvation” can make Jews a little uncomfortable. But the salvation that we’re talking about here is a collective process; it’s all about the group. For the ancient rabbis, individuals cannot achieve salvation on their own. True salvation is about the whole world, the whole of humanity, not the self. We will know that the messianic age has arrived when the highest values inscribed in Torah – peace, justice, love – spread beyond individuals and beyond small groups to encompass the whole world. The concepts themselves require this universal understanding: for peace to be real, it must apply to all nations; for justice

to be real, it must apply to all people; for love to be real, it must be extended to all souls. So to hope for salvation is not a small hope. This is the largest hope we can have, the biggest dream we can dream. How can we maintain such a hope?

Let's go back to the second line of the song:

ומצפים לישועה
Eagerly we search for salvation

This line is from the same prayer in the Amidah, the one about the messianic age, but you won't find these words in the prayerbook we use for weekday services here at GJC, and they aren't in most other prayerbooks either. Instead, these are words that some people add on their own to the prayer in the prayerbook. And it turns out that they add them because of a story told in the Talmud about the soul standing in judgment before God, in just the way we are here on *Yom ha-Din*, the Day of Judgment, Rosh Hashanah, standing before God:

Rava said: At the hour that a person is brought to stand in judgment, the person is asked: Did you do business honestly? Did you set aside time to learn? Did you leave something of yourself in the world? Did you search for salvation? Did you argue wisely? And did you understand the innermost meaning of things?¹

So this is the final exam for the soul, standing in judgment before God, and all of the questions seem fairly obvious, since they are key features of the Torah, that book that we were supposed to study to prepare us for the exam in the first place. All of them, that is, except one: "Did you search for salvation?" Why is this part of the ultimate judgment of the soul? Why is it so important?

Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, explains that the idea of "searching for salvation" has two parts, and I think each part is really a method we can use to maintain our hope, even in the most difficult times.² The first part is internal. It asks us to accept the idea that salvation is possible, that we have not been set an impossible task or a fool's errand of searching out something that could never exist. Rav Kook teaches that we must hold fast to the idea that God never leaves us and is instead advancing salvation toward us at every minute, even if we can't see it happening, and even if it sometimes seems to us that we're seeing the opposite of progress.

So this is the first thing we need to maintain our hope: acceptance of the possibility, just the possibility, that the world could be different than it is, that change

¹ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a.

² See Rav Kook's commentary on the siddur, *Olat Raiyah*.

on a grand scale is possible, that the great dream is not just a dream. For some of us this can be harder than for others, but I think we all have this capability implanted within us. The problem is that because of all of the flaws and upsets and disappointments that life throws at us, we often quite reasonably protect ourselves by burying the capacity to hope very deep inside us, not allowing it to come out and certainly not allowing it to influence our actions. But it's still there, and in the safety of this sanctuary, in the protection of this holiday, we need to search deep down and find it. Psalm 130, which we chanted tonight, asks us to call out from the depths of our souls to God; that might be how deep we need to go to find our capacity to hope. We need to find it, unearth it, brush it off, and bring it closer to the surface where it can do some good for us and for the world.

The second part of "searching for salvation" is external, and it has to do with changing the way we look at the world. Rav Kook asks us examine the world with what he calls a "creative gaze," opening our eyes wide and seeing the promise of salvation lurking in every corner, just waiting for us to recognize it and maybe even to take action ourselves to bring it to life. This special way of looking at the world encourages us to take advantage of every opportunity to bring salvation from potential to actual. We might call this "catching the world being good," and the truth is that we see it and discount it all the time. We see people making peace between friends or between communities who are full of anger and hurt. We see people standing up for justice for strangers on principle, even when the state disagrees. We see people loving others who are nothing like them and going out of their way to do things for them, just for the sake of love. We see it, and we discount it. We call it the exception that proves the rule. But if we look at it differently, we could see it as salvation calling out to us.

We have to hope for salvation all day long. Maintaining that hope – not just the hope for ease and goodness for ourselves, but hope for a transformation of the world – has been part of the Jewish project for thousands of years. So I'm urging you to close your eyes and reach down into yourselves and find your capacity to believe that change is possible. And then I'm asking you to open your eyes and look with a new gaze at this world around us, actively looking for salvation at every turn. Because I'm one of those rabbis who think that the timing of salvation is not pre-determined by God. God is not waiting on some cosmic clock to finally transform the world. God is waiting on us.