

“Hope even with crisis because gam zeh ya’avor”

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One day the wise King Solomon had a request of Benaiah ben Yehoyada, his most trusted minister. King Solomon said to him, “Benaiah, there is a certain ring that I want you to bring to me. I wish to wear it for Sukkot which gives you six months to find it.”

“If it exists anywhere on earth, your majesty,” replied Benaiah, “I will find it and bring it to you, but what makes the ring so special? So that I may know what it is when I find it.”

“It has magic powers,” answered the king. “It can make a happy man sad and a sad man happy.”

Spring passed and then summer and still Benaiah had no idea where he could find the ring. On the night before Sukkot, he decided to take a walk in one of the poorest quarters of Jerusalem. He passed by a merchant who had begun to set out the day’s wares on a shabby carpet. There were rings and earrings and bracelets. Benaiah decided to ask, “Have you by any chance heard of a magic ring that makes a happy man sad and a sad man happy?”

The merchant had not heard of such a ring. But then, as if by magic, the merchant’s father appeared. With an old gnarled finger he beckoned to Benaiah. As he watched, the father took a plain gold ring from the carpet and engraved something small on it, just three letters.

That night the entire city welcomed in the holiday of Sukkot with great festivity. “Well, my friend,” said Solomon, “have you found what I sent you after?” The ministers, being the jealous kind that they were, laughed thinking that Benaiah certainly had failed.

To everyone’s surprise, Benaiah held up a small gold ring and declared, “Here it is, your majesty!” As soon as Solomon read the inscription, he smiled and then the smile vanished from his face. The jeweler had written “*Gam zeh ya’avor*” — “This too shall pass.¹”

¹ Common Jewish folktale, sourced and slightly amended from: <https://breakingmatzo.com/mindfulness/gam-zeh-yaavor-this-too-shall-pass/>

There is a beautiful impermanence to life when we use the lens demonstrated in this story. *Gam zeh yaavor*—this too shall pass; whether “this” is a sorrowful or a joyful feeling or situation. This phrase can apply to more than just to an individual’s life however, it can apply in a myriad of ways if we let it.

In thinking about our holy day season, I am struck that we begin with the commemoration of the destruction of the Temples (and many other calamities since then) on *Tisha b’Av*—seven weeks ago, seven weeks before Rosh Hashanah. The end of our season in three weeks is Sukkot: a joyous holiday whose foundation, whose entire existence, is the temporary structure of a tabernacle, a hut.

We rejoice in erecting a structure which by its very design and nature is not meant to last more than a week. At the conclusion of that festival, we begin our Torah reading cycle all over again. In the face of ephemerality, we have the chutzpah to begin anew once more. I see this at the epitome of hope.

Perhaps one of the greatest assets of humanity is our ability to hope. Even though we know for certain, whether by nature or by our own hands, we will destroy the sukkah, we insist on putting it up. Because we all have hope for what is to come. Perhaps our lives and our life-cycle is like that of the sukkah. We all know for certain that we will die at some point. All creatures die at some point. The details are not for us to know, just the inevitability of the fact. For some people, this fact causes the development of a fatalistic attitude and associated behavior, but for most of us, we do not. And that is because we have hope. We work at bettering ourselves and bettering our world. We have hope, and hopefully?! we mix it with action, that the world and our legacy, however small, will go on after we die.

Part of our ability to hope comes from our lack of memory, or rather, our selective memory. We can choose to remember and acknowledge that which happened negatively in the past, or we can choose to not. Or the likely middle-ground that we remember events *and* maintain hope that the next outcome for us will be different. We are unique after all.

A low-stakes example, a very low-stakes example:
I have maintained an elementary-school aged fascination, love, and knowledge about dinosaurs since I was that age. For a long time, an extinct dinosaur was like any other dinosaur: extinct. Did you know that the Tyrannosaurus Rex, arguably the most famous of all dinosaurs, went extinct about 65million years ago? And get this, about 70 million years *before* that, the Stegosaurus, another very popular dinosaur, went extinct.

That's right, if we had lived when the T-Rex lived, the Stegosaurus would still be extinct. We humans are closer to the T-Rex than the T-Rex is to the Stegosaurus. Fascinating! Because we just think dinosaurs and they are all the same and they are all lumped together, but no! These two never even met.

This concept is hard for us to wrap our minds around because geological time is so vast, it is nearly incomprehensible. It's almost like space also incomprehensible at how big it is. I would also like to think that hope drives us to not see them as discrete eras.

We all know that a catastrophic asteroid hit the Earth causing such effects as to wipe out the vast majority of large living creatures and their food supply. There is clear evidence of this in the fossil and rock records, delicately preserved in the Earth. That's what killed the T-Rex and all of his friends.

Hollywood likes to imagine that we humans could stop a similar-sized asteroid were it to enter our orbit; think "Armageddon²" and movies such like that. That's one way we cling to hope in the face of the unknown and unpreventable. We make radical hypotheses, absurd plans, and irrational contingencies. And we feel better. We feel better because we have the hope that our skills, our knowledge, and our planning will yield a different fate than the one the dinosaurs met at the end of the Cretaceous period.

But what about our friendly Stegosaurus? They all went extinct about 150million years ago and there is nothing in the fossil or rock strata to tell us why. The theory is that small, gradual changes to their environment eventually made it impossible for them to survive. Their favorite plants stopped growing (and they were picky eaters. This is why you should challenge yourself to eat differently). Their herbivore competition, such as the Iguanodon, chewed faster and consumed more, thereby leaving nothing left and eventually causing the Stegosaurus extinction. With relatively a tiny number of fossils, spread over many most continents and over 10million years, we cannot be sure.

And since we cannot be sure, I have another theory. Perhaps they developed space-faring technology and are now lightyears away, munching on plants in the Alpha-Centauri³ system. The vulnerable of their species couldn't make such space travel and those ones stayed behind and that is why we have fossils. It's a major stretch, but maybe?! *Gam zeh yaavor*, this too will pass—whether by extinction or space travel.

A total aside, I'm working on a book about dinosaurs *in* space. Because what kid, and frankly what adult, doesn't love dinosaurs and space. And together? That's just exciting.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armageddon_\(1998_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armageddon_(1998_film))

³ <https://www.universetoday.com/142482/new-instrument-is-searching-for-planets-around-alpha-centauri/>

Think about the human species in 65 million years. We've barely been around in this homo genus form for two million years, and really only as homo sapiens for 100k years. We have seen directly, or through archeological and paleontological evidence that most things eventually go extinct. Cockroaches, sharks, and twinkies are clearly outliers and exceptions.

What beautiful hubris then to think that we won't! Our limitless hope keeps us going. We'll be different. We've broken the mold so far, so who is to say that we won't continue to be unique among all the flora and fauna of Earth?

Gam zeh yaavor, this too will pass. It can make a happy person sad. The Earth, as a planet, **will** exist in 65M years. Will we? Trends indicate that's unlikely, that's a long time for an individual species. So how about 5M? Or 100k? How about 1000yrs? How about 100?

We can say with a fair bit of certainty, nuclear war notwithstanding, that humans will inhabit the earth in 100 years. With near equal certainty, we can say it will look nothing like it does today.

A few centuries ago, we started using fossil fuels (remember those extinct dinosaurs?) to power our world. We had no idea what we were doing to the environment then. But we do now. A couple hundred years later and those initial emissions⁴ of carbon dioxide are still in our atmosphere. The more fossil fuels we burn, the more that ends up in our atmosphere.

We only have our charts and scientific measurement projections to guide us. Let me ask you this. If you start at the visitor's center on Main Street and I ask you how long does it take to walk Main Street here in town, our answers would depend on a plethora of variables—do you stop to eat at McFarlans or the Black Rose, do you get your nails done, do you cross the street multiple times, or shop, how physically able are you to walk, is there much foot or car traffic, what's the weather like, and on and on. Some of these variables you have control over and some you do not.

This is not unlike our climate scientists. They are telling us how long it will take to get to the end of Main Street. Except the end of Main Street is the heat change tipping point. And the biggest variable is carbon emissions—continued increase, stable, zero, or radically hopeful negative. How do you get negative emissions you ask? You plant trees and they suck all that CO₂ down out of the atmosphere like something magical.

What the scientists can tell us is that the temperature increase we have already seen is causing acidic oceans, which causes loss of marine life. The food chain is a delicate dance between predator and prey and we humans are messing with the music. The ice caps are melting, which is causing the oceans to rise.

⁴ <https://ourworldindata.org/fossil-fuels>

The more this continues, the more displaced peoples we will see, not to mention all the animals, because their land will be underwater.

A warm planet means there are bigger fluctuations – hotter summers and colder winters. It means a longer summer, which in some places means fire and drought. As a note to that, I was complaining, as I often do about the humidity (I still long for the dryness of Colorado). It's been warm and it's the end of September—why this summer still going on? And yesterday in Montana it snowed ten inches! That's unusual. People in Montana know it's going to snow, just not this much and not this early. Just like us, it's not this hot this late.

And in a weird way, the climate crisis also means a decrease in insect population. Some theorize that by 2125, there will be no insects left at all. This is not okay. We need our creepy crawlies.

Protect. Restore. Fund⁵. Not the bugs, just the trees, the bugs will inevitably follow.

And this is where our hope comes in. In the face of a global crisis, for which we are intimately responsible, we have the arrogance to say, we can make this right. We can change the trajectory. We have hope enough to say, this is not the future I will leave my grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Take as an example Malala Yousafzai who told us at the UN, when she was only 16 years old: “one child, one teacher, one book, one pen, can change the world”⁶. Her hope that the world can change because someone has access to a pen, did indeed change the world.

Having hope does not mean that we are not afraid.

Having hope does not mean that we feel no need to take action.

Having hope does not mean that we do not have a plan.

Having hope means that we have resilience, desires, persistence, ego to know that the future will be different than the present.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn spoke of hope he experienced as a child:

“My father took me and some friends to a corner in the barracks [in Auschwitz]. He announced that it was the eve of Hanukkah and produced a small clay bowl. Then he began to light a wick immersed in his precious but now melted margarine ration. Before he could recite the blessing, I protested at this waste of food. He looked at me, then the lamp, and finally said, 'You and I have seen that it is possible to live up to three weeks without food. We once lived almost three days without water.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-S14SjemfAg&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0rpyEPnz8JfveDghDE94gclCVGDAw7-Q67MaSRAOVsr0ahNO29smYJIE>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/12/malala-yousafzai-united-nations-education-speech-text>

But you cannot live properly for three minutes without hope"⁷.

You see, Maslow's pyramid hierarchy of needs⁸, is wrong. He believed the base for the individual is physiological—food, water, warmth, shelter. But what sets us humans apart from other creatures who also need those to survive, is our foundation of hope. Hope is what makes us human. And fortunate for us, hope can be quite contagious and inspiring.

Hope is not only relegated to surviving huge events like the holocaust or the Taliban or even the climate crisis. It's necessary in the every day.

Every day we have hope that gam zeh yaavor—this too shall pass. This pain, this struggle is not permanent.

Every day we have hope that tomorrow will be a bit better.

Every day we have hope that our friends or ourselves will feel better.

Every day we have hope that love will conquer hate.

Every day we have hope that our actions matter.

Every day we have hope that what we do will leave a legacy long after we have passed.

But like love, hope is a verb, an action word. It demands of us more than a feeling. For her part on the global stage as relates to the climate crisis, Greta Thunberg tells us to look at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for the science to understand what we need to do.

I think you should, but I did read it and to me the report is dry. And science reports are meant to be dry, they are meant to give us facts. But it leaves the reader seeking ways of even finding hope. Sometimes, the only way of finding hope, is to do something.

As then President Obama said, "The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something. Don't wait for good things to happen to you. If you go out and make some good things happen, you will fill the world with hope; you will fill yourself with hope."⁹

The climate crisis is a global one and there are over 7.5 billion people on our planet. We can each take small steps in our daily lives to make change possible¹⁰. We can eat less meat, especially red meat—I'm sure you've heard that. Not only do cows take up a lot of land and stuff, but the worst part of cows is that they belch. And when they burp, it emits gases which stay in our atmosphere. Burping cows, are a problem.

⁷ *Floating Takes Faith: Ancient Wisdom in the Modern World*; Quoted by David Wolpe, pg. 197

⁸ <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>

⁹ <https://www.latintimes.com/presidents-day-quotes-20-most-inspiring-sayings-us-presidents-369633>

¹⁰ <https://www.curbed.com/2017/6/7/15749900/how-to-stop-climate-change-actions>

We can drive zero-emission cars; I won't even say take public transportation here in Hendersonville . We can make sure our homes are efficient, wash with cold water and dry with low or no heat, use led-lightbulbs. We can xeriscape our yards and use reusable water bottles.

What is the purpose of these examples, and so many more? Each action is a drop in the bucket but eventually the bucket will get full. Secondly, how we live our daily life can bring to the forefront our values and what is important to us. Third, we are able to communicate to others what we do and they can add their drops to the bucket.

But if we are being completely honest, the biggest changes we can make are by putting pressure on the entities which make decisions—the large industries such as Coca-Cola and all oil companies and the government. Not only does the government use the most energy, but they are also responsible for making legislation to require other industries to meet crucial limits. Our voice and our vote are two of the most powerful tools we have to put our hope into action.

Our thoughts and our actions are deeply tied to our emotional expression of hope. We intellectually know that eventually we will go the way of the dinosaurs. Whether by space or by extinction. *Gam zeh yaavor*, this too, we too, will pass. But maybe, just maybe, we will continue to break the mold because we have the greatest asset given to us: hope.

As King Solomon realized, this too shall pass. But even when we are sad, we can find happiness in hope in the fact that we are doing something.

There is no reason to wait to act on hope.

We live in a state of permanent impermanence. *Gam zeh yaavor*. This too shall pass. Everything shall, except for hope. To that shall we cling. To that shall we participate.

Dalai Lama reminds us that: “The very purpose of our life is happiness, which is sustained by hope. We have no guarantee about the future, but we exist in the hope of something better.

Hope means keeping going, thinking, ‘I can do this.’ Like that little engine: “I think I can, I think I can”...and he did. But he didn't just think it, he did it—one chug at a time. Hope brings inner strength, self-confidence, the ability to do what you do honestly, truthfully and transparently.”

In this new year of 5780, may we fully embrace hope. May we fight for our planet in the face of the climate crisis. May we live our lives and take actions as though we are going to break the mold. Shanah tovah.