

**Unlocking the Box Buried Within:
How Psychology and Judaism Give Us the Keys to the Hope We Thought We Lost**

Rabbi D'ror Chankin-Gould | Anshe Emet Synagogue

Rosh Hashanah Day I 5784/2023 | Blum

“There is always a way out.” In July of 2018, the world watched as twelve Thai boys on a soccer team and their young coach, found themselves trapped by torrential rain in an underground cave, in the dark, for three weeks. Miraculously, they all survived. Just around Rosh HaShanah this last year, in September of 2022, Netflix released an acclaimed six-episode series called *Thai Cave Rescue*, telling the story of Coach Eak and his team, the “Wild Boars.” Though several previous films had covered this disaster, this was the first production based on interviews not only with the rescuers, but with the boys themselves. It is the first time that *their* story has been told. For nine long days those 12 boys and their coach had no contact with the outside world. They had only hunger and thirst and darkness. And yet, the boys, each of them, have said one thing very clearly: “We didn’t lose hope.” How is that even possible?!

Hope didn’t bubble up naturally or organically, Coach Eak took steps to uncover it. Coach Eak was orphaned as a young boy and ultimately raised in a Buddhist monastery. He shared his story of survival to *show* the boys that hardship can be surmounted. He said, “We have all had days of rain that never ended, but then it ended.” Coach Eak also took *action* to help reign in their panic. He taught twelve frightened boys... to meditate. Even though they didn’t feel like it, he led them to control their breath and shift their focus. Finally, Coach Eak *held* hope for the boys, when they couldn’t generate any on their own. Eventually, *his* hope seeped into them. Even in the darkness, somehow, these 12 brave boys and their fearless young coach, held fast to hope.

In our lives, we all encounter moments of despair. Most of us, thank God, don’t find ourselves trapped in underwater caves, but we do confront situations and obstacles that feel impossible. We lose our jobs. We, or our loved ones, succumb to illness. We see a dream crumble before our eyes or a nightmare we never saw coming... and we find that hope is far-off and elusive.

Now, thank God, many of us today are in moments of light and hope: our lives are full and rich, our dreams are coming true, we have so much to celebrate. But we all have known darkness before. And, truth be told, we may face it again one day. And it is likely that, in this moment, we are all working to support others who are walking through their own darkness. With Rosh HaShanah upon us, we wish each other “Shanah Tovah U’Metukah” - may you have a sweet, good year. For some, the sweetness of the coming year is easy to imagine. For others, the words might ring hollow: we fear that the year ahead might be as bitter as the one we are navigating at the present.

So often, when we say things like, “Just look on the bright side,” or “try to be cheerful,” or “choose to be hopeful,” as good as those intentions are, it’s not so simple. Western culture acts as if hope will just descend upon us from on High. If only we choose to “buck up” or “see the silver lining” we will find a hopeful heart has manifested within us. The truth is that hope doesn’t work that way. Psychology knows better, and so does Judaism.

There is substantial social science research on the subject of hope. In 1995 Carol Farran and her colleagues developed the “hope process framework” based on 30 collective years of research into how hope (and hopelessness) play out in serious illness. The Hope Process Framework understands that hope doesn’t just appear out of nowhere, rather it is inside us, but often buried, as if in a locked box. The keys to unlock that hope are diverse. Farran suggests strategies, three of which she describes as rational, experiential, and relational.

The truth is that Judaism’s ancient texts and stories echo with the same wisdom. Even though the New Year is a time of hope, the stories we tell on these High Holy Days are all about the heroes of our past who felt *hopeless*. Jonah was ready to jump into the ocean, he had lost hope. Sarah saw no chance of having a child, she had lost hope. Isaac, after being nearly sacrificed on Mt. Moriah, was traumatized, he had lost hope. The High Holidays tell us of those who came before us, those who felt, as we do sometimes, despondent. The High Holidays **also** tell us about the process by which our ancestors took up keys to unlock that box buried deep within. The keys come down to those same ideas as the Hope Process Framework describes: rational, experiential, and relational. In other words, we can **think** our way into hope, we can **act** our way into hope, or we can **relate** our way into hope.

Jonah thought his way into hope. On Yom Kippur afternoon we will read the story of Jonah. God demanded of Jonah that he head to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah ran away. When Jonah absconded on a boat, a storm raged. Jonah told the sailors to throw him into the turbulent waves. He was ready to die. Jonah had no hope of survival. Jonah had no hope that his life mattered or was even worth living.

And then... he was swallowed by a big old fish. In a beautiful Midrash, from Pirkei D’Rebbe Eliezer, the rabbis wonder: what happened inside the belly of the fish that transformed Jonah? Into the mouth of the fish went a despondent human being. Out of its mouth came a confident prophet. The Midrash imagines that inside the fish, God hung a pearl. The pearl illuminated the sea outside so that Jonah was looking about. The fish showed Jonah a great variety of sights beneath the ocean. Amongst them, Jonah was taken to Yam Suf (the Red Sea) to witness the place where our people marched from slavery to freedom. Jonah is given the opportunity to *think*. He *thinks* to himself, “I come from a people who are strong and brave. If my ancestors could make it from slavery to freedom, I can do what God is asking.” Jonah *thinks* his way into hope. He *thinks* about what came before him, and that *thought* exercise unlocks a hope within him he had forgotten existed. We too can think our way into hope. Through rational thought, we can remember that we, our parents or grandparents, or our people have been resilient in the past.

We also think our way into hope by reframing our future. Perhaps we are despondent because the future we envisioned has become impossible. Our hope must now be contingent on new thoughts, beliefs, and expectations. This summer I was lucky enough to take my kids to Disneyland with my parents, sisters, and nieces. My father has a muscular dystrophy disorder. Given the mobility challenges that have ensued, we imagined that he would no longer be able to go on rides with his grandchildren. However, reframing the future opened up new doors, for my Papa, and for our whole family: maybe there is a way to get a *wheelchair* onto a ride? It turns out that Disneyland has mechanisms and adaptations that allowed my father to get on “It’s a Small World” in a boat with his wife, three children, and four grandchildren all together. To unlock hope, sometimes we

need to think. We need to think about our past, and we need to rethink our future. And slowly but surely, hope can manifest.

Alternatively, Sarah *acted* her way into hope. In this morning's Torah portion, we read the story of Sarah who lived 90 years without giving birth to a child. Sarah tried and tried to become pregnant, but time and again, wound up devastated. Sarah stopped hoping for pregnancy. Sarah stopped hoping for a miracle. Sarah stopped hoping. So what did Sarah do, all those dark and lonely years?

She put one foot in front of the other. She took incremental steps towards living life, even in the face of loss and pain. She opened her tent. She greeted guests. She baked bread. When three strangers arrived at Sarah's door, she pulled herself up, welcomed them in, and prepared a meal. Sarah found her way not through her mind, but through her body. How do we unlock hope in the face of pain like Sarah's? Sometimes we need to do what Abraham Joshua Heschel famously suggested: we must take not a leap of faith, but rather a leap of action.

We too can act our way into hope. Science tells us that if you smile, even when you don't feel happy, your endorphins surge. There are moments when cultivating hope requires us to walk in the sunshine, exercise even when it's the last thing we feel like doing, or just feed the cat, bake a cake, or go to work. For some of us, we cannot think our way into hope, we can only act our way into hope.

Years ago, I spoke with an old friend who slipped into active drug use. She lost her job. She lost her house. She lost her marriage. She lost her hope. And she almost lost her life. She couldn't *think* her way out of the darkness, she had to *act*. She attended 12 step meetings, even though she didn't feel optimistic. She took a job sweeping the streets, even though she despised the work. She planted flower seeds, even though she didn't expect to make it to the next spring. Eventually, sobriety stuck, new jobs opened up, and flowers bloomed. Eventually, an experiential approach allowed her to unlock that buried treasure box of hope. To uncover hope, sometimes we need to *act*.

By contrast, Isaac *related* his way into hope. Tomorrow we will read the story of the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac. Isaac's father held a knife to his throat, ready to sacrifice him for what he believed was God's will. If not for the intervention of the angels, Isaac would have died. After the Akeidah, Isaac lost his father: he and Abraham never spoke again. After the Akeidah, Isaac lost his mother: she died from grief and shock. After the Akeidah, Isaac lost hope. No amount of thought, and no amount of action, could touch Isaac. *What* brought Isaac back to life again? The better question is, *who*?

Isaac didn't feel hope. But Rebecca did. Rebecca was lively and quick and optimistic. Isaac grieving- he was lost in the darkness, but Rebecca lit a candle. *Her* light eventually touched *his* soul. The Torah says that Isaac found comfort after his mother's death, only when he was with Rebecca. Later in life, Isaac and Rebecca couldn't conceive because of Isaac's infertility. Alone, he couldn't pray. He just didn't feel hopeful enough. But the Torah says "Isaac prayed to God *facing* his wife": they prayed together. Facing Rebecca, seeing *her* hope and optimism, eventually

Isaac began to feel a kernel of it as well. Isaac finds his way into hope through *relationship*. He didn't have the key to that locked box, but he invited in someone who did.

We too can *relate* our way into hope. When I was in college, I came to the realization that I felt called to be a rabbi. However, at that time, the Conservative Movement was not ordaining openly gay men and lesbians. So, my dream could not become a reality. There were moments along the way, where I lost hope. One day, my rabbi, Ilana Grinblat, shared something with me that changed my life. Rabbi Grinblat showed me the rabbinical school recommendation letter she had written for me. She had signed it. She had sealed it an envelope. She told me, "I am sure that you are going to be a rabbi. I just know it. So, I wrote the letter. It's ready for the day they make up their minds." Rabbi Grinblat's hope freed up my own. With her confidence laid out before me, I felt something small but strong swell inside me.

Often, the key to helping unlock the hope we have buried within, is finding another who has walked a similar path. We feel that our particular pain is invisible and unknown to our community, our friends, and even our family. But if we can find *our* tribe: locate the people who have gone through what we are going through, *their* hope, grounded in the same reality as our own, can do magic like nothing else can.

This is the place where shul, uniquely, has the capacity to impact the healing process: synagogues can play the role of "*shadchan*." We can connect people to one another who have similar stories. This year we brought together a group of single mothers surviving traumatic circumstances with their exes. Together they could unlock hope in one another's hearts. Our monthly bereavement group is an opportunity for those experiencing loss to find hope, by sharing the experience with others who get it. There are times that our rabbis have connected women who survived breast cancer with those going through treatment, couples living with bipolar disorder to others in the same boat, or grandparents learning how to respect and connect with their transgender grandchildren. Synagogues are spaces where you can find your tribe.

In this room, someone is going through a struggle now, that you once traversed. In this room, there is someone who has wisdom and lived experience to give, about exactly the thing that makes you feel most alone. We need each other. Hope can be uncovered when we find our ways into the lives, hearts, and arms of others who have walked in our shoes. This is where I need your help. This year, Anshe Emet is committed to deepening our efforts to build groups and individual connections that will bring together members for the purposes of camaraderie, support, and nurturing hope. If you feel open to it, please let me know what thoughtful pairing would make your life richer and more full. If you feel open to it, please let me know what story you have to share with a person who needs your insight. Your courage will, as always, be kept in the strictest confidence. Together, we can decrease loneliness and build a more hopeful future by fostering deeper connections with one another.

In July of 2018, one remarkable Thai soccer coach taught twelve boys to unlock hope in the impenetrable darkness of an underwater cave. Coach Eak's capacity to nurture hope continues to be relevant for us as the new year dawns. God of Hope, may we be granted the wisdom to *think* our way into hope like Jonah. May we be gifted with the courage to *act* our way into hope like

Sarah. May we be led towards the openness to *relate* our way into hope like Isaac. God, may we find hope in you. May we unlock hope in others. May we allow hope to blossom within us.

May this New Year be one of boundless, life-giving hope.

Shanah Tovah.