

I hate the *busy* wars: you know, those battles when we share with friends, family, colleagues over just how busy we are, only to be told the schedule of the person on the other end of the phone and be wowed (I guess?) by their busyness. We have all been in battle. We recite our busyness with exhaustion and pride. And let's be honest—we expect to win. Busyness indexes what, exactly, about us? That we are important? That we are purposeful? Or maybe ... that we are just really tired.

I hate the busy wars. And I often begin the fight.

I was in one such battle a few months ago. I was pregnant with my now daughter, Rebecca. My first born was transitioning to toddlerhood. Here at work, I was helping our LGBTQ & Jews of Color affinity groups get off the ground, while managing the usual array of conversions, marital couples, and b'nei mitzvah. And, I had to go to the grocery store. I looked at my opponent in this busy battle, a friend I've known for a few years, and knew I had him beat. I mean, come on, I was seven months pregnant—was he even going to play me?

I finished with my ongoing list of responsibilities (if you've veered off into your own, come back. I know it's hard; ok, you win!). I finished with my ongoing list of responsibilities out of breath and more overwhelmed than when I started. He was quiet for what felt like a while, looked at me and said, "Wow, Eliana, Your life is so full".

I waved my white flag.

After that conversation, my busyness did not lighten. On the contrary, we had the baby. My life got more full. But this constant drum beat stopped sounding like sneakers hitting the pavement of a never ending marathon, and started to sound like a parade. Stress and exhaustion still happened. I even still participated in some busy battles. But

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more so, Washington Hebrew responsibilities were trumpeted into my day, along with a bass line of toddler awe and newborn excitement. My language changed from busy to full and my attitude changed with it.

As we begin this new year of 5783, and mark our third Rosh Hashanah in a devastating pandemic, how can altering our language, change our lives? Would it be possible to go from busy to full? From scared to brave? Or, most importantly, and most Jewishly, from despair to hope?

As the People of the Book, we play with language well. One such occurrence happens in the Torah portion we will read next week for Yom Kippur.¹ The Israelites are preparing to enter into the Promised Land. Moses gathers them together and declares, “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life”--*Uvcharta b'hayyim*.²

Uvcharta b'hayyim, choose life, is a strange imperative. When the Torah tells us not to murder, I understand the behavior we are supposed to avoid. Even when the Torah says not to mix linen and wool, I may not abide by the law, but I get what I'm not supposed to do. But choose life? How do we do that? We get up every morning and breathe. We do not tell our bodies to breathe. We just breathe. Life is not a choice we make, and yet, God demands that we choose life. How?

Our commentators and rabbis tell us: Choosing life is not about breathing, they say, choosing life is about living meaningfully, living with intention, living fully.³

In the third year of a pandemic, with a war across the world and polarization as high as inflation, just being able to breathe each day may feel like enough. Just being

¹ Parshat Netzavim

² Deuteronomy 30:19

³ Rashi, Ibn Ezra, & Sforno on Deuteronomy 30:19

able to breathe may feel like all we can do. Yet, *uv'charta b'chayyim*, Judaism says, just breathing is not enough.

So, how do we choose life now? Judaism has a pretty clear answer: to choose life, to choose a full life, we *have* to choose hope. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks declared, Jews are the people of hope.⁴ How, in these trying times, do we live up to that identity? How do we choose a full, hopeful life, when the data surrounding us tell us that hope should feel naive? How do we choose life when despair seems more realistic?

A closer examination of Jewish hope, in Hebrew, *tikvah*, makes this choice easier. A closer examination of Jewish hope reveals that this hope is not naive optimism, that Jewish hope can be aggravating—and motivating, and, finally, that hope is not just *choosing* life, hope is life itself.

Jewish hope is not naive optimism. Do not misunderstand me. Jews are not the people of rose-colored glasses. Quite the contrary. We are the people who share every ailment that comes across our bodies. If Aunt Sylvia's roommate has a cough that turned out to be Bronchitis and a stubbed toe, we will all know about it! We share our pain.

We share our pain to such an extent that we created a prayer around our fear of ailment. Our evening service adds a prayer not seen in the morning or afternoon service. We recite *Hashkiveinu*, our prayer of protection, in the dark hours of the night. Our rabbis thousands of years ago were afraid of the night. They were afraid of this darkness. And so they created a prayer that enumerates their fears –

Defend us from our enemies,

Illness, war, famine, and sorrow.⁵

⁴ *Future Tense*, Jonathan Sacks

⁵ Translation from Mishkan Tefila

The prayer pleads. Our Jewish ancestors did not shy away from pain or fear. They confronted it. They began their Jewish day, which begins in the night, by saying, “We are scared. We are vulnerable. We think there might be pain out there. Protect us from it.”

We have been living in a dark night. Whenever we think we see light, a new variant arises, or a war erupts, our rights are stripped away. We retreat back to our shelter and wonder—when will we see the sun again?

Hashkiveinu has an answer for that. While the middle of the prayer enumerates all that could go wrong within the night, the beginning of the prayer rings of hope. The prayer begins:

Grant O God,
that we lie down in peace,
And raise us up
Our Guardian,
To life renewed.⁶

As Jews, we are well aware of all that could go wrong. We prepare for it. A people living in diaspora, we are always ready to run. We always have a literal or figurative packed bag. And yet, in *the* prayer of fear, in *the* prayer of possible pain, we begin by saying, “Please, God, renew my life.” The prayer declares, “I am not naive. I know what is out there. I am well aware of what waits for me in the dark night. And I want to live anyway. I want my life renewed, anyway. I am going to hope, anyway.”

Uv’charta b’hayyim—choose a life of hope, despite the world, or maybe because of it.

⁶ Translation from Mishkan Tefila

The hope that gets us through the dark night can aggravate us too. Aggravating because it demands that we act. The prophet Zecharia chose even stronger words than Rabbi Sacks in describing the Jewish people in terms of hope. Zecharia declared, You, Israelites, are “*Asirei Ha-tikvah*—You are prisoners of hope.”⁷

As Jews, our hope does not just define us. Sometimes, our hope blinds us. But in the best way. Prisoners can only see so much. They have only the four walls of their cell. As prisoners of hope, our walls are gilded with responsibility and possibility. When death, despair, and pain come knocking, we do not throw up our hands and say, “Oh well,” We cannot.

Our hands, after all, are shackled with hope. Instead, even if we are tired, even if we would really rather not, we get to work. We hope for a better world, and then, do the work to make that happen. Even if it is just to make our cell, our small corner of the Earth, just a little bit better, we get to work and fix our space.

Last spring, multiple states passed anti-LGBTQ and anti-trans legislation.⁸ Death, despair, and pain came knocking. We chose hope. Our young LGBTQ leaders, as well as our veteran social justice champions approached me, independently, and said, “What do we do? How do we hope now?” We got to work. They partnered together, ages ranging from 27 to 85, and created an educational evening on LGBTQ issues. We dove deep into language and identity, as well as legislative issues right here in Maryland.⁹ The night had moments of despair, as we heard how humans were being treated throughout our country. But, in the end, it was a night of hope. A night in which a group of people

⁷ Zechariah 9:12

⁸ [Ron DeSantis signs the so-called 'Don't Say Gay' bill : NPR](#)

⁹ [FreeState Justice - Maryland's LGBTQ Advocates \(freestate-justice.org\)](#)

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saw a problem and asked, “What can we do about it from our space and place?” And so we learned. We enjoyed one another’s company. And we hoped for a better, brighter future for *our* community.

There is a teaching in our tradition¹⁰ that if one is planting a tree when the messiah comes, we should not go out and greet the messiah. We should finish planting the tree. As prisoners of hope, we look to the future. Even if it appears that the messiah has come and all of our pain will be taken away, we *still* finish our work. We make sure that we have planted the seeds for the next generation to strongly and audaciously hope for a better world.

Uv’charta B’hayyim—choose hope to make our lives and those of future generations’ better. Choose hope, because it is the only choice we have. We are prisoners of hope.

Finally, to choose hope in our tradition is, quite literally, to choose life. The Prophet Jeremiah describes God as the “Hope of Israel,” or *Mikveh Yisrael*.¹¹ Thousands of years later, Rabbi Akiva takes this phrase and likens it to a *mikvah*, a ritual bath. As he says,

“Just as a *mikveh*,
Purifies that which is
Impure,
So does the Holy One,
Purify the People of Israel.”¹²

¹⁰ Avot d’Rabbi Natan, 30

¹¹ Jeremiah 17:1

¹² Mishnah Yoma 8:9

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Our ritual bath, our *mikvah*, the one we use at Adas Israel for conversions and life cycle events,¹³ and every *mikvah* in the world, is based in hope. These living waters that, in Jewish law, must be connected to a natural flow of water, is a lifesource. Water– that makes up 60% of our bodies¹⁴ and 70% of the earth’s surface¹⁵–this substance that we cannot live without, in our tradition, is equivalent to, is the same word as, hope. Just as we cannot live without a *mikvah*, without water, we cannot live without *tikvah*- hope.

Anyone who has ever immersed in a mikvah knows just how life-giving it can be. If you have not ever done it, I recommend it and I am happy to talk it through with you. When we immerse we are surrounded by this life source. When we immerse, we are surrounded, completely engulfed, overwhelmed, by hope.

As my mentor, Rabbi Jonathan Blake taught, “...a mikveh is a total embrace, promising: you are not alone. Immerse yourself in the living waters of this community and emerge regenerated, renewed, reborn.”¹⁶ If we let it, this sanctuary can be a *mikvah*. If we immerse ourselves in the promise of the people next to us; if we allow them to see our fears and our vulnerabilities; if we turn to them and ask to partner to make this world better, then this sanctuary, this community, can lift us up and keep us afloat. Even when it feels like the rest of the world is trying to bring us down, we as Jews and as members of Washington Hebrew can come here and *uv’charta b’hayyim*–we can choose to *immerse* in hope.

This is the third year in a row I have stood here and have wanted to say one thing to you: it is going to be okay. As Jews, as a people who have lived through generations of death

¹³ [Community Mikvah - Adas Israel Congregation](#)

¹⁴ [The Water in You: Water and the Human Body | U.S. Geological Survey \(usgs.gov\)](#)

¹⁵ [How Much Water is There on Earth? | U.S. Geological Survey \(usgs.gov\)](#)

¹⁶ [Prisoners of Hope YK 5774 \(wrtemple.org\)](#)

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and destruction, as *this* generation, who has lived through the last three years, we know I cannot make that promise. The dark night is out there and we do not know what will come.

And yet, we are here. We are gathered here in community, in reverence of God and our tradition. We are gathered here, despite all that has happened these past three years and all that continues to happen today.

We are here to do the work and to be immersed in community. We are here and that is not just okay. That is great. That is motivating and moving. That is choosing life. That is full. That is hope.

Uv'charta b'hayyim—again and again, choose life. Make it full. And hope.