

Searching for the Promised Land

When things get tough where does your head take you? When it all feels too much where does your imagination lead you? For me, it's Scotland. I imagine what it would be like to live a remote life on the coast of Scotland – warmed by open fires, living in a close community, being at one with nature, dancing at ceilidhs, being at peace. I enjoy the moment of fantasy and then...gently turn to my life as it is. For I know this dream is elusive – I would not survive a rural life – I couldn't live out my Judaism, I'd be miserable away from friends, family, this city. We all have our Promised Lands – those places we look towards when times are hard. Places and experiences that offer us some glimpse at the lives we want to live. Yours might be somewhere in Britain, it might focus on a new job, a different house, being abroad, being thinner, being more successful – whatever it is – those stories begin 'if only'. Some of those stories can be helpful by giving us vision and motivation but unhelpful if we stay in them, believing the grass is always greener, as we can't see the beauty of what we already have.

I'd like to share with you a story about the Baal Shem Tov, a Chasidic Rabbi, which helps us delve deeper into these stories. Our tale begins as follows, and you may, given its first line, think the story was written for us here today:

It is told that in every generation there are times when hope threatens to leave this world. At such times, the Baal Shem Tov, the great Jewish mystic, would go into a secret place in the forest. There he would light a special fire and say a holy prayer speaking the long-forgotten most sacred name of God. The danger was averted and hope stayed alive.

In later times when disaster threatened, the Maggid of Mezritch, his disciple, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the fire, but I can say the prayer."

And again the danger was averted and hope stayed alive.

Still later, his disciple, Moshe Leib of Sasov, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the fire or say the prayer, but I found my way to this place, and that must be enough." And it was. Hope stayed alive.

And later when Israel of Rizhyn needed intervention from heaven, he sat in his chair with his head in his hands and say, "Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I no longer know how to light the fire, nor how to say the prayer, I can't even find our way to that place, but I can tell the story and that must be enough." And it was.

The power of this story seeks to show us that there is no magical place that can fully set us free. We have the power to find what we need in ourselves, where we are in this moment, no matter how dark things seem. There is an aspect of the story, however, that I struggle with. In this famous tale we are told that the rabbis lost something – they lost the art of lighting the fire, saying the prayer, and finding their way. All they have, we're told, is the story. But I firmly believe that the story is not enough – it grounds us in the past, longing for something lost and gone. We become nostalgic, resentful perhaps, unable to take the steps we need to enjoy and make the most of life as it is.

On a personal level we will understand this – we have to balance looking back and forwards. If we ponder on all that is lost we succumb to despair – if we forever read the news, talk to our friends about how bad the world is today, if we focus only on the pain, there will be no healing of ourselves or of our world. Judaism teaches us to balance the pain of loss with the hope of looking forward – the world as it is set alongside the world as it should be.

We could also understand this on a communal level here at Jackson's Row – poised as we are with our re-development – 20 years in the making with a dedicated team relentlessly pursuing a state-of-the-art synagogue, securing our future. We could, as we take our next steps, discuss 'what things used to be like', 'how things have changed' or *we could* look forward – create new sparks, light new fires and change our narrative and imagine all that awaits us here in the city centre.

Outside of the personal and communal level we could look to Judaism. In one of my first sermons at Jackson's Row, one Shabbat we played Progressive Bingo. I asked the community whether they had been asked any of the following questions as a Reform Jew. I'll ask them to you now – have you ever been asked these? Don't worry you don't need to shout bingo for each one unless you want to!

1. So, can you drive on Shabbat?
2. Do you keep kosher?
3. Do you really have a female rabbi?
4. Do you allow same sex marriages?
5. Do men and women really sit together?
6. Do women wear kippot and tallit?
7. You're a Reform Jew, so did you *megaya*/convert? Did you marry someone who *megay'ed*/converted?

Maybe also you've had friends and family say,

1. It's easy to be a Reform Jew as you can pick and choose.
2. It's a watered-down form of Judaism.
3. You're not a real Jew.

Anyone got bingo?! I have - bingo!

In progressive Judaism we are too used to comparing ourselves with Orthodox Judaism – 'this is who we are in relation to who they are'. I have many conversations, as I'm sure Rabbi Silverman does, with people in our community who feel unsure whether they are doing the 'right' thing. I'm not a good Jew or doing Judaism well as I can't read Hebrew fluently, I don't keep Shabbat, I don't come to shul. We measure our Judaism in a way that makes us disempowered and disconnected from our religion and community. This is the danger in our story of the Baal Shem Tov. Judaism, spirituality, our worth – are not bound up in some magical place that is only accessible by a chosen few. Our Judaism demands of us that we light our own fires, create our own new prayers and

rituals, informed by the past but enlivened by our present and motivated by the potential that our future holds. We cannot live in the fantasy in the dark or in the past.

Living is a struggle. We are grass that withers – we are mortal. We are but flesh and blood – we get ill and those we love suffer. The world feels scary – politics is unrecognisable from a couple of years ago. The warnings from Extinction Rebellion ring in our ears and we wonder whether we, and our governments, can do what is needed to save our planet. We see atrocities enacted between people in China, Burma and so many other places. The world feels dark and overwhelming.

But just like we cannot take refuge in our fantasy places – be that in a croft in Scotland, or the forest with the Baal Shem Tov – we cannot take refuge in the darkness of despair. Judaism simply doesn't allow it. It is a practical religion – it says, here are the tools you need: rituals to help ground you in the present – Friday night candles – be with others and light lights; community – when something happens, for good or bad, or the in-between, find your community and connect with them; a connection with something greater than yourself – spirituality – through music, food, words – whatever works for you; a duty to enact justice in our world – give *tzedakah*/charity, your time, fight for the oppressed; teachings that remind us to watch how we speak to others and treat others; Torah – pouring over our stories to understand that hope can overcome despair – out of the depths of slavery we found freedom – against all odds we found liberation – it is possible.

We have to light our lights to ensure that Judaism survives. We must ensure that our children and grandchildren know that Judaism offers us meaning and is entirely relevant to our world today – more than that it has the possibility to be redemptive – to help build a better world. We can't be scared of the change that process will involve.

It is fascinating that the definition of the Greek word 'Apocalypse' means "an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling". Similarly our Hebrew word for 'world', *olam*, has a meaning of hiddenness. When times seem dark, much more is revealed, opportunities are before us – we are granted many chances to heal our world, lift the divine sparks. As I finish let's re-write the ending to our story. We return to the embittered Israel of Rizhyn who sits with his head in hands, seeking intervention from heaven...

"Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe" he says, slowing lifting his head up...I no longer know how to light the fire but I will kindle a new fire here in memory of the original fire but mostly in order to drive out the dark we are experiencing now – I will do my bit.

Nor do I know how to say the prayer once uttered by my teachers but I will find new, powerful words which reflect my teachings and the reality around me.

I can't even find our way to that place in the forest, or the forest itself, and whilst I will always tell the story I will do more.

I will create new paths for me and my children, I will live my Judaism through my good deeds and slowly, one deed, one interaction at a time, build a better world. I will ensure that the fires I am lighting will welcome all – my community will be open to our non-Jewish partners, everyone

regardless of sexuality or gender. These new paths will not be afraid to open the doors of this synagogue wide to our city and the world beyond – to be proud and empowered in who we are and what we stand for. And that will be enough.” And so it was – hope stayed alive.

May we all this year find strength in knowing that our enchanted forests are right here and that we have all the necessary tools to create and keep hope alive, within us and for each other and the next generation.

**Rosh Hashanah morning 5780/2019
Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen**