

Are We There Yet?
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When I was a child growing up in Southern California, my family held a membership at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. We loved the wonder, beauty, and majesty of the ocean just off our coast--cute sea otters; huge, strangle-looking sunfish; teeming kelp forests, graceful jellyfish... You get the idea. I absolutely loved those trips, and, to this day, one of my favorite places to go when I visit a new city is the aquarium.

What I *didn't* love as a kid was the drive to actually *get* to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and to near-by Carmel where we sometimes stayed (Yes, Carmel. Carmel is here in Indiana. Carmel, California has, at most, one round-about). For those who may not be so familiar with the geography of California, Monterey is about 360 miles north of my childhood home in the San Fernando Valley. That is roughly a six-hour drive without stops.

As kids, my sister and I of course had no real concept of what six hours in the car felt like. It just felt...long. We might be excited to get there, but the seemingly endless car ride would eventually get boring, old, burdensome. We would get anxious not knowing when we would be getting out of the car. Eventually, we would tire of our little "State-Plate Bingo" game. We'd get bored of playing with our stuffed animals. And we would flat refuse to keep searching for Volkswagen Beetles of any color.

You know what one of us would say next. Go ahead, say it with me.

"Are we there yet???"

I have to admit, much of this pandemic has felt somewhat like being a small child on a long car ride again. Bored, constrained, desperate for a change and a return to something familiar, normal. Briefly over the summer, we thought we were done, that we'd arrived in Monterey. And then, the Delta variant arrived on the scene.

Sometime in early August, headlines began reading something along the lines of, "The CDC, noting that even vaccinated individuals can carry enough viral load to infect others, recommends that even vaccinated individuals resume wearing masks in public, especially when indoors. Large gatherings are not recommended."

I was suddenly a small child in the backseat of my parents' first-generation Honda Odyssey again, with no real understanding of time, and feeling like I was never going to get off of Highway 101 ever again.

We had not, apparently, gotten there yet. We'd apparently just pulled off the road for lunch in Santa Barbara, also a beautiful beach town, but not where we were trying to go. Not the new beautiful normal we're trying to accomplish. And now we've been asked to get *back* in the car. And like small children, we don't know how long we're going to be back in the car, because one hour already feels like three. Three more sounds absolutely unbearable. If I *were* still a small child, I might have thrown a temper tantrum.

Are we there yet?

But we Jews are used to this. We are a people of constant journeying and waiting, of never quite getting there.

Our Torah reading works like this. Ever notice that the Israelites of the Torah never actually *arrive* in the Promised Land after wandering the wilderness for forty years? If you've ever wondered why you can't quite remember ever hearing the end of the story when our ancestors get "there," don't worry. It's *not* that you haven't come to Shabbat morning services enough in the final months before the High Holy Days. It's because that actually doesn't happen in the Torah; that piece of the story is reserved for the book of Joshua, the first book of the prophets, *after* the Torah. It's a book that we never actually read in full as part of our liturgical cycle. Redemption is for later.

Our prayers, too, constantly cycle through the three major themes of our story: Creation of the world and its renewal each day, God's rescuing us from bondage in Egypt, and Revelation of our Torah and our partnership with God. Redemption...still yet to come. Still in the future. Still, and always, ahead of us.

For millennia, Jews have written about the coming of the Mashiach, God's anointed one. He will someday come, when the world is ready. From the Bible through to writings in our century, Jewish literature is littered with yearning, with hope for the day when the world will be its best self, deserving of that gift. When we are peaceful and loving. When we all honor our tradition and our fellow Jews and fellow human beings. For Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, often called Rambam, that yearning and hope is principles of faith: "I believe by complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he tarry in waiting, in spite of that, I will still wait expectantly for him each day, knowing that he will come."

For Rambam, faith is waiting for something, yearning and striving for it--while accepting that it may never happen. At the core of this principle of faith is finding it in us to hope, even when it feels like we've run out of steam to keep hoping.

COVID has taught us this feeling well. Waiting, hoping, longing--and knowing we will never be the same, that our world is forever shifted. We have experienced irreplaceable losses. We will be forever marked by this particular long and unexpected, and very bumpy road trip.

So, what do we do when we're tired of license plate bingo? When there aren't any more Slug Bugs on the road? How do we find resilience when we feel like we're still stuck in the backseat of our parents' minivan?

We look for sources of hope. We look for reminders that we can weather this difficult journey. We do it with external reminders, with internal distractions, and by speaking to one another, making room for their pain and our own.

One way we can find hope is to set for ourselves reminders of what is to come. It sounds counterintuitive to put something in front of you to remind you what you are missing, to constantly see what you want back, but it can also serve as a reminder that it can come again, that it will someday return.

A story is told in Pesikta d'Rav Kahana: A young woman married a king who wrote her a beautiful and loving Ketubah, marriage contract. In it, he laid out his love for her, and all that he hoped to give her in their lives together. Early in their marriage, he is forced to journey far away, and ends up being gone for much longer than expected. Now, in the ancient world where there was no means for distant communication, it was considered acceptable if a husband was gone for too long, a woman was permitted to presume him dead and remarry so that she would still be cared for in a world where she could not have her resources of her own. And so, many people would

come to this young wife and say to her, “Why do you not remarry? Why do you waste your youth waiting for your king, your husband who will never return?”

But she would not remarry when she started to feel hopeless. Instead, she would pull out her ketubah and read it, again and again, and remember the love and the joy for which she was waiting. That would renew her patience, and reignite her hope.

Rav Kahanah is perfectly in step with Rambam. This young bride is a metaphor for the Jewish people, and the ketubah is a metaphor for our Torah. We read it again and again, letting it remind us of the love God has for us, letting it renew our hope for a better tomorrow and eventual redemption--whether by the hands of a literal messiah, or by the work that we will do to create the peaceful world in which he is supposed to appear.

But I think we can read that ketubah as a metaphor for any physical sign that reminds us of hope. I invite you to think: What is yours?

Perhaps it is a souvenir of a favorite place you’ve visited on a vacation, a reminder of the beautiful memories you’ve had there--and a reminder that you might someday go again, and even if not, the memories give you joy and hope.

Perhaps it’s the photos of the family you haven’t been able to see for a while, but which reminds you of who you are at your best self.

Maybe it’s not exactly physical, but a song that transports you to a better place and time.

Perhaps it is scenery out the window, seeing that the seasons have changed, and remembering that time is moving forward. That we *are* still in the car, but that the clock isn’t actually frozen at 3:07pm. This minute is just taking longer than we thought it would.

Because seeing changes, noticing that progress is possible, is another source of hope. Often in life, we tend to ignore things that don’t change much. Ever had a Save the Date or a child’s piece of artwork attached to your refrigerator for so long that it became invisible? That’s actually an evolutionary feature of our psychology; the world can be so full of constant stimuli, that we *must* be able to filter some of them out to catch what is important, and the things that don’t change much are often the first things filtered out.

But when too little is progressing it’s hard to keep noticing the important and exciting things in front of us. We start to feel a sense of despair at being stuck in one place, and forget that progress has been made, that we know more about this virus than we did a year ago, even if it feels like we’re back in the same place when our in-person services once again returned to livestream.

Perhaps this is why we have so many different blasts from the Shofar: the variation wakes us up, and asks us to look at the world anew. “Look out your car window!” the shofar says, “I know you think you only see the road--but look beyond it! You also see groves of trees, fields and farms, cows roaming the open land. The journey is long, but you are moving. You will make it, if you can just hold on a bit longer and find hope.”

But what about when looking out the window doesn’t quite feel like enough? When we have so much anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and true loss that we struggle to look up and out the window?

In Mishlei, the Book of Proverbs, a verse reads, *דַאֲגָהּ בְּלֵב-אִישׁ יִשְׁתַּנֶּה וְדָבָר טוֹב יִשְׁמַחֶנָּה* “If there is anxiety, [worry or a pain] in a person’s heart, let them quash it, and turn it to joy with a good word.”

The Rabbis of the Talmud seek to understand how one is to “quash” pain. How is it turned to joy with a good word? *Yashchenah* does mean to quash, or to force down. Therefore, Rabbi Ami in the Talmud says that the way to deal with pain or anxiety is to suppress it, to force it out of one’s

mind. Rebbi Asi, on the other hand, shifts the vowels on the word, and makes it *yesichena*--one should talk about their struggles. If you have a worry, talk about it. Here is the good word.

The two rabbis offer two seemingly opposite suggestions for dealing with our pains and anxieties: push them out of our minds, or talk about them. In either case, the goal seems to be to make room for a good word, to make room for joy. Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Edels, often called “the Meharsha,” lived in sixteenth century Poland. In his commentary entitled *Chidushei Aggadot*, he attempts to spell out these two suggestions further. To force it out of your mind is so you can study Torah. I read this as telling us this: When it feels like our pains and anxieties are so overwhelming that we can’t seem to think about anything else, we should stop our thoughts in their tracks (this is a trick cognitive-behavioral therapists will share as well), and throw ourselves into worthy work.

Perhaps that *is* Torah study, finding divine inspiration and growth from the wisdom of so many of our ancestors and teachers. Perhaps that work is political action, throwing yourself into the work of creating a better world. Perhaps it is volunteer work, or your job. Perhaps it’s a creative endeavour, whether one you’ve done for years, or one you’ve been learning since this pandemic began. Any of these can allow you to work through the pain, and siphon the energy into that work. It might just help hope return.

Sometimes, to address a fear, set it aside, and throw yourself into worthy work, and let that work give you hope.

And sometimes, the pain is too big to distract it away. And so, we turn to Rebbi Asi’s re-read of the verse: we talk about it. To tell it to others, says the Meharsha, is to seek advice. But I think it is more than advice. Sometimes, we just need the space to verbally express what is going on for us with the help of someone we trust. A close friend. A family member. A therapist. We speak aloud what is weighing on our soul, and invite another to examine it with us, to offer a perspective from outside our own heads. To help us spot what we may miss ourselves. To help us find a way to take a step forward. To help us see hope.

I find it tremendously helpful that dealing with the pain of feeling stuck--and finding hope anyway--is something that has been revisited so many times over our many centuries, from the Book of Proverbs, to the Talmud, to Sixteenth century Poland, to here and now. We may be dealing with new sources of anxiety and new causes for hopelessness, but *dealing* with that is human. Just knowing that gives me hope! We have always struggled with anxieties and painful journeys. And we have always sought ways to make that tolerable.

Neither the Talmud nor *Chidushi Adgadot* try to say which of these approaches is the “correct” read of our Proverb, because they both know that each is correct in its own time. At times, we have to figure out how to discern which is the right approach to find hope in a given moment. Is the anxiety brought on by the length of this car ride something I need to set aside by doing something else, maybe by practicing a new skill I learned earlier in the pandemic?

Or have I already made too much sourdough, and I really need to call a friend I haven’t spoken to in a while? On the other hand, we are all in this car together. It’s possible I might have already siphoned off too much of my stress into someone I love, only to find it’s still festering in me. Maybe it *is* time for me to throw my energy into something else, into a creative process I can allow to pull my focus.

Both of these suggestions can help us to make room for a good word, whether one we discover in the distraction, or in the words shared with another. To me, the crux of the passage is quite simple: it is human to have moments of despair and hopelessness. But giving into them, letting

hopelessness fester, will eat at our spiritual roots. When we are experiencing these trials, we need only to seek help in finding hope.

Since Rosh Chodesh Elul, Jews the world over have recited Psalm 27 daily. That Psalm concludes: קוֹה אֶל-יְהוָה מִן הַבֹּטֵחַ לִבְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה: "Hope in God; be strong and brave of heart, and hope in God."

When you are struggling to find hope, strengthen your heart and look for it outside yourself.

With help from one another and from God, we can strengthen our hearts. We can find ways to help release, or at least set aside, our anxiety. And in doing so, may we align ourselves with hope. A friend and colleague of mine, Rabbi Rafi Spitzer, told me that there's a funny, counterintuitive thing about human nature he noticed: admitting you feel stuck can be the first step in feeling unstuck. Admitting you feel powerless can be the first step in noticing what power you do have.

I think here in the Psalm, which I have needed more this year than any other, we can see the same thing with hope: Recognizing that I feel hopeless is the first step to addressing it, and can be the first step to finding hope. When I realize I feel hopeless, I know it's time to search for hope.

We have been on the road a long, long time. When we stopped for lunch, we thought we were there. Unfortunately, we weren't. And realizing that may have led to a new round of despair, anxiety, hopelessness. But I am doing my best to instead align myself with hope: We saw that life beyond this pandemic is possible. There is more work to be done, there are more problems to address beyond the pandemic, and there is more time left in the thick of this pandemic than we thought. But life beyond it is possible. If we hold onto hope.

I don't know when we'll get there. I, unfortunately, am not the parent driving this minivan, nor can I predict the roadblocks that might continue to slow us down. But I am in the car with you, and I think we can help one another have hope. I'll place my reminders of better times out in front of me, and help you set out yours.

Sometimes we'll feel like playing games to distract ourselves, and sometimes we won't.

Sometimes we'll be willing and ready to share what is going on in our hearts with one another, and sometimes we won't.

Sometimes the best we'll be able to do is gaze out the windows for a bit.

But we'll be together for the ride, and we'll keep supporting one another and hoping together through the whole journey. We'll support one another as we experience new rounds of pain and loss.

I align myself with hope. I do have faith that someday, we'll make it to Monterey. And, if we just hold on together and help one another through it, it might just be the best trip yet.

Shanah Tovah