



***Parshat Toldot***  
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**Raising The Cup We've Got**  
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The great preacher in Atlanta, Andy Stanley, has recently given a series of sermons about a topic that is always relevant, especially now. What happens, he asks, when it is what it is, and what is isn't great. You don't love it, but you are stuck with it.

Your marriage is what it is. Your health is what it is. Your kids are what they are. Your financial situation is what it is. Your job is what it is. There can be so many areas in our life where it's not great. We are not loving it. But there is no clear way to change it. No easy way to get out of it. What do you do?

That universal problem has a particular application in month nine of the pandemic, when the number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths are all soaring— and all of us are suffering from Covid fatigue, social isolation and numbing routine. Our Thanksgiving this year is what it is: small, different, disconnected, not like any other Thanksgiving.

When life is what it is, when Covid is what it is, how do we think about it, what do we do about it?

I want to offer a single idea that recurs in the work of the late great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He writes about this idea in at least half a dozen different books. *It is the difference between optimism and hope*. If you thought optimism and hope were synonyms, Rabbi Sacks teaches us that it is not so.

Optimism, he observes, is a feeling that however bad things might be at the moment, things are going to get better. They just *are* going to get better. Optimism is an emotion. You

don't have to *do* anything to be an optimist. You just have to *believe* things will somehow improve.

By contrast, hope is a sense that if things are bad at the moment, we have work to do together to make it better. Hope is not an emotion. Hope looks like a noun, but in its deepest sense hope is a verb. Hope demands something of us. Hope demands that we act. When we hope, we act to make things more hopeful.

Rabbi Sacks observes that Jews are not optimistic. We don't just have a feeling that things will get better. But we are profoundly hopeful because we work to make things better. In the language of our people's national anthem, *Hatikvah*, *od loh tikvateinu*, we never lose our hope.

What do we do to make our hope?

To take just one example from Genesis, Abraham is all alone after Sarah dies. Isaac sees that his father is all alone, and he worries that his father is lonely. But he doesn't only worry. He works to make it better. According to the midrash, he goes to the town where Hagar and Ishmael live, a place called Beer Lehai Roi, and he reconnects Hagar to Abraham, their love is rekindled, they get married, and the last chapter of Abraham's life is spent not as a lonely widower but with a woman he dearly loves, and in this last chapter they have six more children together. Isaac made that hope happen.

How do we make our own hope? How do we take it is what it is, and make it better?

Nathan, your Bar Mitzvah this morning is an exercise in making our own hope. You did not dream of having your Bar Mitzvah in a pandemic. As you shared so poignantly in your d'var, you are not experiencing what your parents, grandparents or your brother Josh had. You are not having a traditional Kiddush or party. And yet you have convened and brought light into

the lives of your family and friends who are tuning in to our livestreamed service. For your mitzvah project, you had wanted to tutor children in math. Now you are doing your tutoring on Zoom, and you are creating lasting connections with your students. That is making our own hope. That is taking what is and making it better.

I want to tell you a story about an object that literally embodies the Jewish expression of hope.

In 1938, a 10-year old boy named Wolfgang Wilhelm Franz Hallo experienced Kristallnacht. His house in Frankfurt, Germany was attacked by Nazis. They shattered glass and crystal. He watched, terrified, holding onto the leg of his grandfather.

One year later, 11-year old Wolfgang boarded a train from Germany to England as part of the Kindertransport. The Kindertransport was a rescue program in which England agreed to permit unaccompanied Jewish children from Germany under the age of 17 into the country. These children had to leave their parents behind—in many cases never to see them again—in order to live with a non-Jewish British family. This 11-year old boy, and his two older sisters, were able to get out of Germany on one of the last trains.

When he boarded that train, this 11-year old boy held in his hand a Kiddush cup that contained an engraving of his first name, Wolfgang.

This Kiddush cup was a birth present. The Nazis allowed Jews leaving on the Kindertransport to take with them one ounce of silver. The Kiddush cup was originally two ounces. And so the cup was given to a silversmith to cut in half. The 11-year old boy clutched this cut down Kiddush cup in his hands on his way to Birmingham, England, where he lived, until, in 1941, he boarded a ship to Canada. On that ship he continued to hold onto the cut down Kiddush cup. He continued to hold onto that Kiddush cup when he boarded a train for New

York City. He arrived at Grand Central Station in 1941 quite literally with a nickel, a penny, and a cut down Kiddush cup.

This 11-year old boy, who before his Bar Mitzvah went from Germany to England to Canada to New York, would go on to become Professor William Hallo, one of the world's leading experts on the ancient near east, and the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig, and a professor at Yale for 40 years. He is also the father and father in love of our members Jacqueline and David, the grandfather, the Opa, of our members Justine, Nicole and Jackson. In the full bloom of his adult life, Bill Hallo used this cut down Kiddush cup every Friday night to make Kiddush. Once it was on a Kindertransport from Germany to England. But it would go on to grace Shabbat dinner tables in New Haven, Connecticut for decades.

This coming Friday, this Kiddush cup will be put to a new use entirely. This Kiddush cup will be used when Opa's granddaughter Justine and her beloved Jacob stand together under their chuppah. The cup that was once held by frightened 11 year old boy, will, 81 years later, now be used for the wedding of his granddaughter and her beloved in a pandemic--for rebirth, for renewal, for love, for home, for hearth, for hope, for future.

So back to Andy Stanley's question. Back to all of our question. What do we do when it is what it is, we don't like what it is, and we are stuck with what it is? What do we do?

We remember what Rabbi Sacks taught us. We remember that we are a people of hope. We take what is, and we act to make it better.

We raise the cup we've got to life, even now, especially now. Shabbat shalom.