**“Trafficking in Hope”**

**Rosh Hashana Day 1 5778**

**September 21st, 2017**

**Rabbi Victor Urecki**

**Congregation B’nai Jacob**

It has been a difficult year, right?

I can recall only one time standing before you where emotions were as high as this year, and that of course were the days after 9-11. Before that, I would have to go back to 1973 and the Yom Kippur War.

But those were years of shock, fear, pain, and a sense of coming together. This past year feels different. There is a sense of rage, frustration, and, for some, anger that has often been directed at one another.

The whole country feels on edge and if people aren’t marching, they are walking on eggshells for fear of bringing up their views.

Here in our community, that “on edge” feeling has made this a tough year as well. Ideas designed to bring people together has caused friction and causes based on good ideals has created tension.

It has been a challenging year.

I would say in times like these that religious leaders look at each other to find comfort and strength but even in my profession, there appears to be a sense of frustration and unhappiness. I was with almost 300 rabbis a couple of weeks ago, all denominations, and the mood was anything but comforting. Typical comments I heard were the words of one rabbi who I made the mistake of asking how long has he been at his pulpit. His answer: “Twenty-one years of hell”. The only rabbi I got a smile and a hearty embrace was a rabbi comfortably dressed in jeans and jacket.

He retired in June.

It is a challenging environment.

For everyone.

I am not here to break down why it feels that way to so many, why this country is angry, nor why there is such tension in congregations; nor am I here to affix blame. I bring this all up because of something I also heard late this summer that I want to be my watchwords as we start the new year with and maybe enlist all of you to join me this year.

I have many roles as rabbi, now beginning my thirty-second year: Educator. Pastor. Advocate for Israel. Religious Guide. Spokesperson for Judaism. Communal Leader.

I do each role with various degrees of success and competency but there is another role I absolutely need to play, especially after this very difficult year. Moving forward, it may be my most important role.

This is how it was expressed to me:

A rabbi needs to be a “Trafficker of Hope”.

In angry, contentious, and difficult times, my role is to help reset the conversation and maybe, starting today, remind a community of where we really are.

Today, I start my role as a “Trafficker of Hope”.

Look at this morning sedrah, always an odd choice of reading for a day as significant as Rosh Hashanah. It is the birth of Isaac, the second of our great Patriarchs; it quickly degenerates into an ugly family dispute between Sarah and her son Isaac, and Hagar and her son Ishmael.

And Abraham stuck in the middle.

It must have been a tough year for Abraham. All he wanted in life was to have a child who would inherit his land and carry on his dreams. He now has two sons and it is tearing his world apart. Sarah has been his faithful companion and the tension between these two lovers is unbearable. Hagar was the innocent woman who by agreement gave Abraham his first son; now she and Sarah can no longer live under one tent.

Where did it all go wrong and why is everyone so angry at each other? This stared out so promising. Everything was going according to plan.

And so, Abraham does what any person of faith does: he reaches out to G-d. Life wasn’t supposed to be like this.

G-d tells him simply:

“Don’t be upset at what is happening. Listen to Sarah; in Isaac, will be your seed. And it will be okay with Hagar and her son, for I will make him a nation, for he is your seed, as well.” (Genesis 21)

What is G-d here? G-d is:

“Trafficker in Hope”:

Stay calm and carry on, Abraham.

I have often read those words and wondered how that conversation with G-d helped Abraham in any demonstrative way. G-d offers Abraham no real solution to the situation he is in; no Solomonic solution on how to keep both children together under his tent; no way forward to keep his wife and Hagar happy. In fact, G-d doesn’t even tell Abraham that Sarah is right. G-d also doesn’t tell Abraham: Hey, next time have some faith in Me. You should have waited on getting Hagar pregnant; you messed up big time.

G-d doesn’t give Abraham a solution nor assigns blame.

Instead, G-d leaves Abraham with the greatest comfort imaginable:

Hope.

It is going to be okay, Abraham. Isaac will be okay; Ishmael will be okay; Hagar will be fine; Sarah, too.

Trafficking in Hope.

Abraham had a hard year and G-d said to him: it is going to be okay. Hang in there and carry on.

We spend most of our lives wallowing in our miserable thoughts. I shared with you something our friend Dr. Bob Rubenstein taught me, namely that studies show that 80 percent of all the thoughts rabbling around in our heads are nasty, ugly negative ruminations. We are such negative creatures. And we rabbis don’t help matters. We spend a lot of time at these pulpits sighing and “oy”-ing to you. I recently went through my archive of sermons down through the years. Common threads: “This is our most challenging year”; “This is Israel’s darkest hour”; “We are living in the most challenging of times.”

No.

We are not.

We are living in the same challenging times that people before us did. Like Abraham. Like Sarah. Like Sarah.

One of my favorite writers Julie Ioffe of The Atlantic, has had this “pinned” tweet since the beginning of the ugly 2016 election:

Goodnight. Tomorrow will be worse.

No.

Tomorrow is going to be better.

And if not tomorrow, then the day after.

The most important role I can play? That we can play this year?

Being “Traffickers in Hope”. Telling people that things are going to be okay. Hang in there.

When the world is on fire, we shouldn’t be adding kerosene; we should be putting out the fire.

When a community is angry, we don’t need to be yelling; we need to be the calm voice telling everyone: it is going to be okay.

Because it will be.

This has been quite a year here in our community and in our synagogue. We have had some important discussions, some hard choices, and some critical decisions; And these discussions, choices and decisions have tested us, stressed relationships and have led to circumstances that scare some of us, creating camps and forces that look at things differently. And these good discussions and tough choices will loom again on the horizon.

But it is going to be okay.

How? I don’t know, but I do know it is going to be okay.

Today, just for today, humor this trafficker. Stop for a moment and look at where we are. It’s 2017. I have a New York Times article dated 1973 about Charleston Jewry which, because of the economic difficulties and the flight of the young, predicted the demise of our community in less than 25 years (spoiler alert, that would have been in 1998). Not just of our synagogue but of our Jewish community.

West Virginia and the Jewish community was in deep decline.

In 1973.

I wasn’t even a Bar Mitzvah yet.

Think about that. Not only are we both still around but we have the resources, the people and the desire to want to shape our destiny. Are we going to get it right? Not always. Are there going to be hiccups along the way? Of course. Is this a transitional moment and, perhaps, since we don’t have the benefit of knowing the future, are we feeling what amounts to birthing pains of a renaissance in our community? Maybe. And maybe the contractions we are feeling are supposed to hurt and this “pregnant” community is feeling miserable now.

We don’t know the future nor where it will lead but it is 2017 and it is going to be okay. We have quite a community here, active and doing some remarkable things. And during challenging times. And that future of ours will be fine.

It is going to be okay.

Let us not forget that. It doesn’t change the discussions we need to have and the changes we know we need to make to move forward. But how are we forgetting all that we are, all we have done, and all that is yet to happen.

And we will be all right together.

It is going to be okay.

I need to be a “trafficker in hope” and I will be this year. So should you. Let us listen to G-d here as He spoke to Abraham: it is going to be more than okay.

Let me also enlarge the “Hope” for you.

Let us stop thinking this is Israel’s worst year ever. It is not. Believe me, when we were in Israel this August, we saw the Jewish State’s many strategic challenges. We saw Hamas stationed in Gaza near Israeli’s villages. We were close enough to see an Hamas lookout post. We were in a Hamas tunnel and saw firsthand what Hamas continues to plan to do against nearby kibbutzim. We saw and heard Israel’s northern challenges from Hezbollah in Lebanon with its 150,000 rockets aimed at Israel; we were shown what is happening Syria and told about Iran’s growing presence there; we were given briefing after briefing on the incredible military tests of a state surrounded by hostile players. And we saw firsthand Israel’s internal threats which range from tension between secular and religious, Haredim and American Jewry and, of course, the Palestinian-Israeli situation. It would be so easy to despair at the existential threats and fights from within which jeopardize the heart, soul, and body of the Jewish state.

But today, just today. Let’s stop for a moment and look at where we are. It’s 2017 and a Jewish state will turn 70 years old next year. Folks, almost 75 years ago, there wasn’t going to be Jews, let alone a Jewish state; let alone a vibrant Jewish state. Go to Israel and witness an astonishing dream come true; a messy, exciting, complex, exhilarating, frustrating, magical, politically hairpulling, inspiring Jewish state. Does it have problems? Do you realize where America was 70 years into its existence? We hadn’t even experienced our civil war yet! We can obsess over every problem Israel faces, and there are many, but I want to be a “trafficker of hope” this year for the Jewish state. I want to listen to G-d today as he spoke to Abraham and tell you:

Israel is going to be okay.

More than okay.

And this country. Oh, what would we do without politics? It has been a tough year. If your side won in November, you haven’t enjoyed a moment of peace because the other side has not been gracious losers and if your side lost in November, the other side has not been gracious winners. And each side feels the other is fundamentally destroying the moral fabric of our country. Each side feels the country is falling apart because of the other side.

Folks, it is going to be okay.

This may be the hardest point to convince people but you know, we’ve been here before. This is not the worst year ever. Aaron David Miller put it best: we survived the Gray versus the Blue in this country; we will survive the Red versus the Blue.

So many of us feel this is the most challenging time and there has never been a time like the one we are living in. But you know, I’ve got a good memory and a great library. Both Rabbi Cooper, of blessed memory, and Rabbi Koller, may G-d always be with him in blessing, left me a ton of old sermon books. Rabbi Cooper also left me bar mitzvah speeches written by students that span decades and sermons he delivered during the Depression, during World War II, at the height of the Cold War, Vietnam, and the civil rights movement. I have my own speeches from the 80’s when people were certain that the Soviet Union and the US were heading toward certain mutual nuclear annihilation, from the Gulf War when it looked like Israel was about to be hit with chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein in the 90’s, sermons during 9-11, and from the 2008 market collapse.

Each decade, we faced challenges that we were not going to survive from.

But we did.

My point is that yes, we have challenges. And I am not saying the battle for the ideas and ideals we believe in do not matter. They do, they will continue to matter and a society you care about requires of you to stand up and speak out. But folks, relax. Listen to Aaron David Miller: we survived the Blue and Gray. We will survive the Blue and Red. From this day forward, I promise to be a ‘‘trafficker in hope” and I invite you to listen to G-d here as he spoke to Abraham. Hang in there. It’s going to be okay.

More than okay.

Tomorrow and the days that follow, we will face the challenges of any synagogue, any community, any people who value our heritage and our ancestral homeland, any people who care deeply for national issues that matter to them.

But today as the shofar sounds throughout our shul, at Temple Israel, throughout our country, Israel and the world, may it remind us that its sounds have inspired and given hope to the souls and stirred the hearts of our people for centuries… centuries. People without hope were given hope from those sounds. The shofar reminds us as a people that with a new year, there is new beginning; and with a new beginning, there is hope. Our country, our people, our community, our congregation, and we have been through so much. But you know, it is 2017 and we have a new year. Let us thank G-d, traffick in hope, and carry on.

It is going to be okay.

Amen