

Rosh HaShanah Day 2 - 5785
Congregation Beth El - Voorhees, NJ
Rabbi Sam Hollander
“Besorot Tovot - What Is In Your Pocket?”

What is in your pocket?

In our pockets or in our pocketbooks, there are essential things that we always need nearby. Each day as we prepare for the day, we intentionally fill our pockets. Wallet and keys and... thanks to Steve Jobs, our pockets have been reimagined. From the introduction of the iPod with the groundbreaking tagline “a thousand songs in your pocket” to dependency on smartphones. Our pockets are no longer a place intended for loose change, rather they are a portal connecting us to the entire world. At the touch of fingers, our pockets are filled with an infinite amount of information. Today, we intentionally carry so much in our pockets.

Yet, at the end of the day when we empty out our pockets, or when we reach into the dryer after completing a load of laundry... our pockets can also surprise us with unintentional reminders of our days. A candy wrapper, a crumpled up receipt, or an inspirational fortune from a fortune cookie that you felt compelled to save. Our pockets are the vessels carrying our wants and needs through the journey of life.

So, what is in your pocket?

It was said of Rabbi Simcha Bunim, an 18th century Hasidic rebbe, that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. One was inscribed with the saying from the Talmud: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*, “for my sake the world was created.” On the other he wrote a phrase from our patriarch Abraham who in the Torah said: *V’anokhi afar v’efer*, “I am but dust and ashes.” Rabbi Simcha Bunim would take out and read each slip of paper as necessary for the moment.

As we reflect upon our actions from the past year, which slip of paper do you find yourself reaching for in your pocket? Engaging in teshuva can be humbling... We admit that we have made mistakes. *V’anokhi afar v’efer* “[We] are but dust and ashes.” But on this Day of Judgement, Yom HaDin, we also remind ourselves, and God the ultimate Judge, that we are worthy of being forgiven, we are worthy of being inscribed into the book of life because *Bishvili nivra ha-olam* “for [our] sake the world was created.”

To be honest, for the past year each time I hear a ding on my phone or I feel a vibration in my pocket, I hold my breath as I await to see the latest news alert. I quickly scan the headlines hoping not to see the name of a hostage or a soldier killed. When I pull my phone out of my pocket, I pray that it is not a red alert sending families to run for shelter. But it is not just Israel

that concerns me: I wish that each time I see a headline that a Jewish college student was physically harmed or verbally abused on a campus, I did not need to automatically run through my mental rolodex of what students do I know on that campus. This year I don't need to search deep in my pocket to be humbled. Each time I reach in my pocket for my phone, I am reminded just like Rabbi Simcha Bunim that "I am but dust and ashes." *V'anokhi afar v'efer*.

But when we feel as though all hope is lost, we reach into our pockets and we find the words, *Bishvili nivra ha-olam* "for [our] sake the world was created." A powerful reminder that we are not forgotten. On Rosh HaShanah we celebrate the creation of the world. Yet when we speak about creation, it is not about an action that happened in the past. *HaYom Haarat Olam* - "Today the world stands as at birth." On Rosh HaShanah we celebrate the ongoing process of creation. *HaYom Haarat Olam* - the world is pregnant, full of hope and new possibilities. Today, we look forward to the future. Rabbi Gordon Tucker writes, "think of this day as a way to remake ourselves and our world, not about Creation in the past."

I find it ironic to be speaking about what is in our pockets today, because I stand here wearing a kittel, a simple white garment specifically designed without any pockets. This is the kittel that I wore on my wedding day, and a kittel is also used as a burial shroud, a simple outfit worn by the dead. A kittel has no pockets because when we leave this world, we do not take anything physical with us. And when a couple stands under the chuppah, the kittel without any pockets signifies that the couple is marrying for love, and not for what they possess. On these High Holy Days, even without pockets, there is something that we Jews always carry with us. We the Jewish people always carry with us, Tikvah, hope.

One summer during rabbinical school, I was a hospital chaplain at NewYork-Presbyterian Weill Cornell on the Upper Eastside of Manhattan. There is one thing that my patients all had in common... None of them had pockets. Wearing a hospital gown, there were no pockets. Any personal possessions or valuables that they came with to the hospital were placed in a clear plastic bag near the bedside.

One afternoon, I remember meeting a patient and his wife. The patient had injured himself while preparing the house for a big anniversary party. Instead of celebrating, he was spending his milestone anniversary in the hospital. After listening to his story, I looked at him and asked "what is giving you strength right now?" He took a moment to think, and then I saw him reaching for what would be his pocket. Realizing he had no pockets in his hospital gown, he signaled his wife to retrieve his wallet from the plastic bag at his bedside. As he searched his wallet, he began explaining to me that when he was in excruciating pain the night before in the Emergency Room, feeling overwhelmed by his situation, he was reminded of a piece of paper that he had been carrying for years in his wallet. Several years ago, he was in shul and a rabbi had given a sermon about the phrase *V'gam Zeh Ya'avur* "this too shall pass." At the end of the

service, the rabbi had printed small cards with the phrase for the congregation to take with them. He had forgotten all about this piece of paper in his pocket, until that night in the ER. He smiled as he pulled out the card from his wallet to show me. This piece of paper was the hope he needed during a difficult time. For years, he literally had been carrying hope in his pocket.

We all carry hope with us, regardless if we realize it or not. Over the past year, I have learned so much from Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the mother of Hersh z”l, a 23 year old American-Israeli executed by Hamas after 11 months in captivity. One of the many lessons I continue to carry from Rachel is her mantra that “Hope Is Mandatory.”

The Israeli national anthem is *HaTikvah*, the Hope. The words were first written in a poem by Naftali Herz Imber called *Tikvatenu*, Our Hope. *Tikvatenu* contained nine stanzas, and only two of those stanzas, in a revised state, comprise the *HaTikvah* that we are familiar with today. Other songs were considered for the national anthem by the Zionist movement and later by the State of Israel, but *HaTikvah* and its focus on hope captured the hearts of the people. The original poem began with the words *Od Lo Avdah Tikvatenu*, Our hope is not yet lost. At the funeral of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, his father Jon spoke about his continued hope that the remaining hostages will return home saying *Od Lo Avdah Tikvatenu*, Our hope is not yet lost. Jon’s ability to continue to hold onto hope, even at the funeral of his own son, reminds me of the original ending of the poem *Tikvatenu*:

כִּי רַק עִם אֶחָדוֹן הַיְהוּדִי
גַם אֶחָרִית תִּקְוַתנוּ!

“Only with the very last Jew, Only there is the end of our hope!” It is a strong statement, with a powerful message. As long as we the Jewish people live, our hope lives too.

Hope is essential to Jewish existence. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explains, “People often confuse optimism and hope. They sound similar. But in fact, they’re very different. Optimism is the belief that things are going to get better. Hope is the belief that if we work hard enough together, we can make things better. It needs no courage, just a certain naivety to be an optimist. It needs a great deal of courage to have hope... And hope is what transforms the human situation.”

Rabbi Sacks reminds us that we are not passive optimists, waiting for change to come. We the Jewish people are a people that believe in hope, because we know we can make a change. In Jewish tradition, we often speak about waiting for the Messiah to come. However, at our Passover Seder tables and during Havdalah at the conclusion of Shabbat, there is a different person, other than the Messiah, that we sing about. It is Elijah the Prophet, that we hope will come soon because it is Elijah who will announce the coming of the messiah and the redemption

of Israel. At the conclusion of a meal, when we recite Birkat HaMazon, we request that God sends Elijah to us.

*“Harachaman hu yishlach lanu et Eliyahu hanaviv zachur latov,
vivaser lanu **besorot tovot**, yeshuot v’nechamot.”*

May God, the Compassionate One, send us Elijah the prophet,
May he be remembered for good
To bring us **good news** of redemption consolation.

It is this expression, *besorot tovot*, a hope for ‘good news to come’ that has become the expression of the year for Israelis. Previously used by only a few, *besorot tovot*, this hope for good news to come, is now the expression Israelis use daily when concluding a conversation. It is a powerful psychological exercise of positive thinking. *Besorot tovot* reminds us to remain hopeful. And as we have learned from Rabbi Sacks, it is hope, not optimism, that is the belief that we can make the change for good. As the order of the words in Birkat HaMazon remind us, we first need hope *besorot tovot* the belief that good news will come, before there can be *yeshuot v’nechamot* redemption and consolation. We have the power to envision and create the good news that is needed, the hope that drives the change to make a better world.

On Rosh HaShanah, we empty out our pockets. We cast off the crumbs, we rid ourselves of our sins. But did we really get rid of everything? If you reach into your pocket, there may be something that will surprise you, hope, because we always carry with us hope.

As Rosh HaShanah fills us with hope and the message that change is possible, I am reminded of poem written this year by Hanna Yerushalmi entitled, “In his pocket”:

The rabbis advised:
keep two truths in your pocket, one should read:
I am but dust and ashes
and the other should read:
the entire world was created for me.

An 8-year-old
has something else
in his pocket.

Confetti.

Why?

It's his emergency confetti, he says,
during these raw days
he carries it with him
everywhere
just in case there is good news.

Rather than saying *L'Shana Tova*, let me leave you with saying *Besorot Tovot*. In this new year may our pockets be filled with confetti and our hearts with hope. And may our hope for good news inspire us to make the changes that will transform our hopes and dreams into reality for this new year.

Ken Yehi Ratzon