

It's been a very hard year in which to be Jewish. Whatever your politics, whatever you think about what's going in Israel and Gaza, it has been a stressful and painful year. I don't know anyone that hasn't been affected in some way. We are about to mark the anniversary of the worst attack on Jews since the Holocaust, Israel and Iran are on the brink of war, there are still hostages abducted on that day unaccounted for in Gaza, thousands of innocent people have been killed in the war, and thousands of Israelis and Palestinians are still displaced from their homes.

This is one of the most difficult Rosh Hashanah sermons I have ever had to write - because it's the first day of the Jewish new year – it should be a time for optimism and hope. I have been wondering what voice of hope I can bring this morning in these uncertain times. Today is the birthday of the world, in Hebrew Yom Harat Olam. But the word Harat doesn't actually mean birth. The word harat comes from the word herayon, meaning pregnancy. So actually today is a celebration of the potential of the world, of how the world **could be** in the future, at the proper time. There's a Hebrew phrase you say to someone who's pregnant – Sha'a Tovah – may the baby come at a good time, the right time. Perhaps the situation will be resolved at the proper time.

The Torah reading for the first day of the new year is of the first birth described in the Torah, the birth of Isaac. And it also tells

us of how Isaac and his half-brother Ishmael were separated. Isaac fathers the Jewish line, the family of Israel. Ishmael, by tradition, is the father of the Arab nations. They are both almost killed by their father Abraham. In our Torah reading today, Ishmael and his mother Hagar are sent out into the desert with just a flask of water. It's very likely they will die of thirst, certainly Hagar believes her son is going to die. Isaac is almost slaughtered by his father after God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son, or the only he thinks he has left.

There is grief and pain embedded in our mutual story and this year it is only too obvious that both ordinary Palestinians and ordinary Israelis are both suffering. In the Talmud, in the tractate about Yom Kippur, it asks from where we get the law that you should allow yourself to be killed rather than commit murder. And the great 3rd century Babylonian rabbi Rava says to someone is being forced to kill someone else: What did you see to make you believe that your blood is redder? Perhaps the blood of that other person is redder. This doesn't mean that you can't wage a war of self-defence. But it does mean that we need to value every life. There has been a terrible loss of life on both sides in this war - and we need reminding that every human being bleeds in the same way.

It's hard to see a way through when you're scared. Fear is such a powerful motivator against moving forward. In the story we're about to read, Sarah finally, after a hard life, has everything –

she has a much longed-for child, the love of her husband, her position as matriarch assured by her new status as a mother. Yet on the day of her victory, the big weaning feast that Abraham throws to celebrate his son, she sees his half-son by Hagar, her maid, and gets them both banished. This is not just the jealousy of a wife for a mistress – Sarah told Abraham to sleep with Hagar to make sure that he had an heir when she thought she was infertile. But I think she can't allow Hagar and Ishmael to happily co-exist with her because she's scared that if she shares her good fortune, she will lose it. Fear is a powerful and destructive force – it can protect you if there is real danger around, but it can stay longer than is needed, and stop you moving forwards.

How can we talk about hope after so much trauma? How can we even begin to talk about peace when Israel is at war on at least two fronts?

And yet we do yearn for peace. The longing for peace is repeated about a dozen times in every service, we keep on coming back to it. The word for peace, Shalom, isn't just about an absence of war. When we say Shabbat Shalom to someone, we're not just saying may you have a Shabbat without war in it. Shalom is about a deep sense of harmony and integration. Shalom is about wholeness, wellbeing, contentedness with who we are. Is it possible to experience

such deep inner peace, when there is such an absence of literal peace in the world?

Repeating the word shalom, like a kind of mantra, is a reminder, that something else is possible. It keeps hope alive. We can't do much to create peace in the world but we can be open to the possibility.

Because we do need hope and holding onto it in the midst of despair is a powerful and necessary practice. The work of hope isn't about ignoring the reality all around us, but finding a way to wake up every morning and commit every day to the work of making a better world. As we gather together today to imagine and describe the world we want to see, perhaps we can start to build hope together.

A couple of years ago, an extraordinary collection of modern midrashim, Rabbinic stories, was published, all by Israeli women, called Dirshuni. There's one by Rivka Lubitch, called Faith, that I want to share with you. She writes: The first generation were people of faith. They saw God dividing the Red Sea and taking the people out of Egypt and they believed. The middle generations were also people of faith. Although they hadn't seen the miracles, they placed their trust in the faith of their ancestors, in what God had done, they believed in the coming of the Messiah and they waited. And this generation is also a people of faith. **How?** This generation questions the

truth and questions their ancestors faith and doesn't trust anything. So how can our generation have faith? This generation take cares of God and takes care of the Torah like a nurse taking care of a baby. The baby trusts the nurse and the nurse takes care of the baby, nurtures her and loves her. We question everything but we still have faith in our capacity to care for others. I see this every day in this community. I see people who say they don't believe in God, who don't like coming to services, go out of their way to care for others and nurture our community. Caring for others, raising our children, teaching our students and bringing together our community can be a bridge to hope even when we are filled with anxiety or doubt.

I watched the film, about the attack on the Nova music festival, *We will Dance Again*, last week. It's a very haunting film but there's one episode that stuck in my mind.

A young man in his 20's was hiding in the bushes, as terrorists continued shooting anyone they could find, and he found himself next to a woman in her late 30's, a mother of three, who was terrified. He instinctively put his arm round her, comforted her, and then looked after her for the rest of the day, finally running with her until they got to a place of safety. It was a powerful moment of human connection. She said he saved her life. And it gave me hope. It gave me hope.

Isaac and Ishmael were reunited, as adults, after Abraham died. In chapter 25 of Genesis, they bury him together in the cave of Machpelah. And then Isaac goes to live at the same well that saved the lives of Hagar and Ishmael, in the area where they settled. Isaac settles down, we are told in a place called Ber-Lachai-Ro'i, a name which means the Well of the Living One who sees me. That's what Hagar names the well when she first ran away from Sarah. So it's reasonable to assume that having buried their father, Isaac and Ishmael are reconciled and live in the same neighbourhood.

This is not the season of anger or revenge. This is the season of return, of teshuvah, where we think about where we really want to be, who we really are, and work out how we're going to get there. It's a hopeful time because we hope that with sufficient effort, we can change for the better. It's said that hope is like a tree of life not just for the individual but for everyone. And by keeping that spark alive we can create a more hopeful world. Oseh Shalom Bimromav, hu'ya'aseh Shalom aleinu, ve'al kol Yisrael, ve'al kol ha'olam. May the One who brings peace above, bring peace to us, to the people of Israel and to the whole world. Ken Yehi Ratzon. Shana Tovah.