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Temple Beth Abraham

Hope

Our ancestor Miryam is someone you probably know as Moses' older sister. She was, according to our tradition, a midwife. She followed her mom Yocheved into the family profession, as a teenager. She started when Pharaoh was ordering midwives to kill baby boys, but Miryam used to say: One of these boys is going to be our redeemer.

She didn't just think this, she would regularly just call it out. She said this so often that she got a nickname, Puah, which according to the midrash is like the sound of a shofar and means something like the *Oh-yeh, Here-comes-the-One*.

It was no question the craziest time to be saying things like that, and I'm sure people dismissed her because she was just a teenager. But of course she was right. Things got worse first, so everyone else thought *they* were right, and then -- Moshe was born.

How do we get to be like Miryam?

Whenever I asked people this summer what they wanted me to talk about on Rosh Hashanah, the most frequent answer was: hope.

How do we hope like Miryam? How do we get hope, preserve and even expand hope?

I know you ask because of 2020 -- the chaos of the pandemic, the racial justice upheavals, the political divisions among even us in this congregation to a degree that has surprised us and alarmed us.

And always there are individual challenges to hope -- for people grappling with mental illness, with physical illness, with addictions and recovery; your own and in your families. Work challenges, family conflicts tenacious from one year to the next -- and this is hardly a complete list of the things that strain hope.

Every August for years I would write a Rosh Hashanah sermon about hope. Pages and pages, straight into the garbage. I am a hopeful person, but I couldn't explain what hope actually *is*. All I would come up with was a story here and a story there about something that turned out right, as if I could talk you into believing life is like that all the rest of the time.

Finally four years ago I came across a teaching that allowed me to finish and give my first sermon about hope. It's from Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright and dissident who helped shepherd his country out of communist tyranny in the 1990s.

Havel wrote: "Hope is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success... Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

Havel says, we don't talk about hope when the outcome is assured. You don't have to *hope* the Patriots will make the playoffs (at least not before this year.). Hope is for when you're not sure what will be, or you think the odds are against. Havel says hope *is* a kind of certainty about the future -- but it's a spiritual certainty. That there are people here who absolutely matter today and tomorrow, that there is a moral universe that is absolutely clear if it doesn't exist yet. Hope is doing something *for* those people and *toward* that picture of the world.

You don't have to be feeling positive or even have an optimistic temperament right now to be hopeful. There is defiant hope, there is angry hope, there's

Miryam-style, don't-tell-me-when-it's-stupid-to-hope hope. Positive emotional energy isn't required to start hoping. The hope itself creates joy.

Pharaoh couldn't stop Miryam and her mother from running their baby-saving underground. His power just didn't work against their hope. So he just told everyone else to throw the baby boys into the Nile. He counted on there being plenty of people not affected by hope.

That still didn't stop Miryam from going around saying out loud: One of these new babies is going to be our redeemer. Pharaoh didn't bother her. But Pharaoh's escalating words and orders finally got to Miryam's father, Amram. The Talmud says he was a major leader in the tribe of Levi, and he just threw in the towel. We're expending all this energy for nothing, he said. *Lashav anu ameilim* לשוא אנו עמלים. He either meant there's no chance anymore, or he meant I don't have even a fuzzy picture these days of what a different world could be. So he left his wife and all the other men did the same.

Miryam tracked him down and said: Abba, what you are doing is even worse than Pharaoh. Pharaoh makes decrees and maybe they are followed and maybe not, but you set an example and already everyone is following you. Pharoah's decrees are against the boys only, but you are cutting off all future boys and girls. Pharoah's decrees reach this earthly world, but you are preventing our souls and future souls from the World to Come.

She stood right up in her father's face, and he took back his wife, and so did all the other men. And immediately: Yocheved conceived and bore a son, Moshe -- the boy who lived, the one who would be the redeemer.

Miryam taught that to step toward hope, the first thing is to locate the nearby obstacle and work on that. Not the farthest one, not just Pharoah. Who's the Amram in your life who once had hope and lost it, or who is blocking you from living out your hope. When that Amram is you, you have to find your Miryam who will tell you what Miryam told her father.

So how did Miryam even get it into her head to hope at that time? There's a legend about an old lady, who taught Miryam about the bones of Joseph and their secret code.

Joseph was a history-book-thing even for Miryam, sold by his brothers and eventually the right-hand man to a Pharaoh. When Joseph was about to die, he said: Bury me here in Egypt. But I am telling you that God is for sure coming back for you, and you all swear to me that you will find my bones and bring them back home with you. There was a special code Joseph called out so the people would have a way to get access to the spot where Pharaoh was going to bury him.

The point is Joseph's own niece was there -- her name was Serach, daughter of Asher, and her name is in Torah in two places, in Genesis and in Numbers. She appears to be the one person who lived all the way from Joseph to Miryam.

After Joseph, some Jews forgot to tell their kids about the bones, forgot to tell their grandchildren about Joseph's promise, and everyone forgot where they put the access code to Joseph's bones. Except for Serach bat Asher. Generations passed, and she had no one to tell the code to but herself.

When Miryam was growing up, Serach saw something in her, and told her -- I was there when Joseph promised we would be saved. I was there when he made us promise not to forget his bones.

Well, Pharaoh was in charge of the bones and realized if he could keep them from the Jews they couldn't get to freedom. He took the box with the bones and buried it down at the bottom of the deepest part of the Nile River. New Jersey style. No bones, no liberation.

But Miryam and Moshe brought Serach bat Asher all over Egypt, and when they didn't find the bones buried under any land they took her to the Nile. It was deep and murky, so she just stood on the shore, calling out the code phrase she had

been keeping for four hundred years. Suddenly the waters began to toss and swirl, some say they split right down the middle, and onto dry land popped this box of Joseph's bones. They grabbed it, and headed for freedom.

Hope is an alliance between the past and the future, the old and the young. One generation knows about the bones, but of course they can't move until the next one furnishes the muscle, carries them along.

Two researchers at Emory, Marshall Duke and Robin Fyvish, found out something about teenagers who know the stories of their families and ancestors. They gave these teens a standard psychological test, and then asked the teens twenty questions like:

Do you know where your mom and dad and grandparents went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know about an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?

If you've ever had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah with me, you know that I ask questions like this before we do any other preparation.

In the Emory study, the kids who knew more about these things tended to be more resilient. Especially if they knew these facts as a story with hopes and obstacles and how their parents or grandparents responded.

Family stories are like Joseph's bones and secret codes. Our personal families, and the larger families like the Jewish people or America.

The story of Joseph's bones is how Jews always think about hope. Judaism is defined not by original sin, but by original hope. It's the cruse of oil in Chanukkah, which someone thought to bury in the sure knowledge that someone later would need it and find it, and stretch it to kindle more and more light. It's the ram placed for Avraham to find in the thicket, just when he didn't think there was any real way forward.

You the older generations -- you were there when Joseph's bones were buried, you've got some of the codes. You were there at moments of big promises, social triumphs, times the world convulsed and changed.

You who have lived through wars and social movements and protests, pandemics and terror and family tragedy -- you've got a special power. Maybe you're not exactly sure where the box is buried, which story is most important right now. Look for your Miryam, and she'll take you to the river. See if you can find the secret code together.

Our stories today about important times in the past are not just too secret and not just negative; even our positive ones are flat. They're too short. They are a history textbook paragraph. We can only see a picture of Rabbi Heschel marching with Rev. King so many times.

What we need is to really sit down, like the Emory families, like Serach and Miryam. For me, when I think for instance of Jews and racial justice, it's not just the rallies and sermons I need to hear about, but more stories like of organizers sending rabbis out to airports in 1964, where by careful planning they would "accidentally" run into their home-state Senator who was trying to duck a vote on the Civil Rights Act. Let's talk more about the organizing, the motivations, the obstacles -- let's talk about the midwives, and the miraculous moments of birth. These are not short conversations. If it doesn't have layers like that, it's hardly a secret code.

Our prayer services always end with hope. The last paragraph of Aleinu begins *al-ken n'kaveh* על כן נקווה. *Al ken, al ken*…. It means: "on top of this certainty, on its foundation, we will hope."

Hope is built *on* certainties, about the worth of people and a moral clarity about how the world should be, learned from our past.

Hope is something *we do together* -- because we need each other for the days when one of us is beleaguered or demoralized, and another has energy and an idea of what to do, and what we're after may take ten of us, or a thousand or a million.

Hope isn't optimism, and it isn't the certainty that things will turn out right. Hope in itself doesn't guarantee healing or *Tikkun Olam.* But when we hope together, we make it more possible that we will become the people who can make these things happen.

Hope is a prayer we repeat each day like Aleinu, a song we sing morning and evening no matter what kind of day. Hope like that can't stay angry -- we sing it, because hoping itself is joy.

That's why we end our services with Aleinu, with *al ken*. With the harmony of voices singing out the words -- *bayom hahu, bayon hahu yih'yeh Adonai echad ush'mo echad* -- on that day, on that day coming, Adonai will be one and God's name, one. And all our different voices, the different hopes we are helping each other hope, harmonize in *Echad*, into one.

Shana Tova.