

Yom Kippur 2009
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Hope is a beautiful thing – it's the waiting that ruins it. There was no hope in Eden. Didn't you notice? God said, "Be fruitful and multiply," but we didn't do it. There was no sense of interaction with that world. Adam and Eve were tourists, eating mangos and naming crocodiles. Two weeks in Paradise is a vacation. A year is exile. Even in Auschwitz there was hope. There was none in Eden.

So the problem seems to be how to elicit and then how to moderate hope. When we took God's suggestion and ate from the tree of knowledge, our tourism in Eden was ended and we had to be satisfied with a weekend at the Broadmoor. What we got by leaving Eden was hope and ambiguity. I don't like ambiguity, but it is what supplies most of the interest I find in my fascinating life.

Too much ambiguity? Prozac. Too little? Hopelessness, or the desire to get back to Eden.

Can there be too much hope? Oh yes – what causes genocide but perverted and excessive hope, too big a desire to get rid of the ambiguity raised by other people with other ideas? If only those other people would go away, we could all... If only the Jews would get out of Europe... If only the Jews would get out of Israel... If only the Hutu or the Serbs or the Catholics, or the devil knows who else would be eliminated, I could end the ambiguity, I could live in Eden.

We have suffered a loss in life that only a few of you can feel because you are so habituated to the present situation that you think it's natural. I saw F.D.R. ride past me in an open car. I was as far from President Eisenhower in his motorcade as I am from you – he was in a convertible riding through the streets of New York City. IN the case of Eisenhower, our eyes did meet for an instant. So what? The McGaha twins were also there, eighty years old and greeting the president, one gotten up in bedsheets as the Statue of Liberty, dehydrated, the other as a lipsticked and rouged Uncle Sam. None of us provided any necessary guidance for that administration of either of those presidents and the sisters must have been a jolt for Ike, but the symbolic power of those open car rides was palpable and enduring. The over-hoping took that tradition away from all of us.

It's the ones who can't live with ambiguity who threaten our freedom.

What is the greatest textbook of ambiguity? The Torah, followed immediately by the rest of Tanach. I've been confronted by people saying: Why is it the Good Book when it's full of rape, murder, betrayal, theft, lies, and bigotry, and by a God who asks a man to kill his kid, or circumcision, or when we hear of a woman who circumcises a man with a flint knife? Even with different arrangements, I can feel the sting of that one.

Our recent blood-drenched century seems to have given us all the ambiguity we can tolerate; communism and capitalism are founts of ambiguity; Freud, Einstein, Darwin, all dealers in ambiguity. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, enemies of ambiguity...and now? Where are we now? That's where the hope comes in – but not too much.