

Kol Nidre 5772/2011
“The illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable!”
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

So, I was walking down the beach this summer and I kicked something metal in the sand. I bend down to inspect it and realize that there is a middle-eastern looking lamp at my feet. As I brush it off, there is a puff of smoke and a genie appears.

“Your wish is my command,” intones the genie. “Don’t I get three wishes?” I say. “Don’t get greedy,” says the genie. “And don’t get selfish either.” “All right,” I say, “Listen it’s been tough being a Mets fan these last few years. How about they make it to the World Series and then win against the Yankees?” “Are you kidding?” Says the genie. “Have you seen their line-up this year, what with the injuries and all – you know I’m only a genie. Try a different wish.” “Okay,” I say, “The Israelis and the Palestinians are trying to get back to the negotiating table. How about if you make it so they actually succeed in reaching a permanent and satisfying agreement for both of them.” The genie thinks for a moment and then says, “Do you want the Mets to win in seven games or to sweep the Yankees?”

Special thanks to my friend and colleague Rabbi Jack Moline for the joke, no thanks to the Mets, Israelis and Palestinians for the reality that makes it hurt when we laugh.

Over these last few days and weeks our thoughts have been especially concerned with the welfare of the State of Israel.

It is hard to remember a New Year that has entered with so much bad news. The prevailing mood is one of pessimism with little hope that recent developments will work out well for the land and the people we love.

We welcomed the Arab Spring with cautious optimism and the hope that democracy would come to an area of the world that desperately needed it. But as the democratic forces struggle to get their acts together – the forces of Islamic Radicalism seem to be quite well organized and quite well funded and in Egypt and Syria and Lebanon and even Jordan the winds of change are not blowing in our direction.

Add to this the determination of the Palestinians to move forward in proclaiming a State and bypass any need to negotiate with Israel.

And the developments in Turkey, the continued empowerment of Iran, even the diminution of America’s perceived power on the world scene to influence events – all seems to be working against Israel.

Is it any surprise that the mood in Israel is grim? The perception amongst most Israelis is that wherever they look they are confronted with a rapidly deteriorating strategic situation, and increasing isolation in the world. The image one hears most often repeated is one of fortress Israel and the verse most often quoted these days is the one from Numbers 23:9 where the non-Jewish prophet Bilam describes Israel: *Heyn Am L’vadad Yishkon, u’vagoyim lo yitchashav* - “Israel is a nation destined to dwell alone – not to be reckoned among the nations of the world.”

If I were to try and accurately capture the mood of Jews as we enter the New Year 5772 – it is undeniably one of pessimism and cynicism.

The optimists are in full retreat, while the cynics taunt them: “You thought there could be peace? You thought they *wanted* peace? You thought they were *capable* of peace? Listen to Ahmedinijad! Listen to Erdowan (Erdogan)! Listen to Abbas! Listen to what is being said in Egypt, in Syria, in Jordan – listen!” says the cynic – “and admit once and for all that you the optimist were wrong to believe in the possibility of peace.”

Such I believe is the mood in Israel and here amongst our Jews as well.

But on this most sacred of days – I come before you as your rabbi to plead that you not give in to cynicism, not to give in to pessimism and that now more than ever we need to maintain the faith, keep faith with the possibility, the hope of a better tomorrow, and assert ourselves as a people of faith.

What I will argue for tonight is neither pessimism nor optimism but faith, – what H.L. Mencken defined as, “the illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.”

I believe that both the cynic and the optimist present a false choice.

A cynic is someone who thinks he *knows* what is going to happen and it will be bad. An optimist is someone who thinks he *knows* what is going to happen and it will be good.

Throughout our long and often arduous history, we Jews have struggled against both naïve optimism and crippling cynicism.

What the optimist and the pessimist share in common is they are both convinced they know what tomorrow will bring. But the truth is we do not know what tomorrow will bring. What we Jews have always brought to each new day is faith – an ability to look honestly at the present and to be willing to roll up our sleeves and do the hard work that might make for a better tomorrow – all the while believing that a better tomorrow was possible.

The current picture is dark – but it is not hopeless. That is why I am arguing for: “the illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.” Because I believe that long before Mencken postulated it, we Jews practiced it and it is what lies at the very core of my understanding of what it means to be a person of Jewish faith.

First let me clarify this notion of the illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable. It is not just because I am a Mets fan, but all baseball fans understand this notion of the illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.

Nate Silver the statistician, writer and all around whiz kid who made his mark using his mathematical genius to wow the world with his predictions in the last presidential elections – wrote an article on the front page of the New York Times about what may have been one of the most epic sports collapses in history – and it happened last week. He tried to quantify what had to happen to get the Tampa Bay Rays into the playoffs and keep the Red Sox out. He pointed out that as recently as a few weeks ago the Red Sox had a 99.6% chance of reaching

the playoffs. Those are pretty good odds. And then last Wednesday night things got even more improbable. It all came down to the last game of the season – one in which the Rays were losing to the Yankees by a score of 7-0 in the 8th inning! And it was a game they had to win, their chances of winning – 300 to 1 – they needed only one more strike to make the last out. On the other hand, The Red Sox were winning *their* final game in the bottom of the ninth with the Orioles down to *their* final strike. Multiplying the mathematical probability of all the things that had to happen – Nate Silver deduced that the probability of the Red Sox not making it and the Rays winning was one chance in 278 million! One chance in 278 million – and guess what happened?

To have faith means to believe in the possibility of the improbable. It is what makes a baseball fan a baseball fan and what makes a Jew a Jew.

Philip Tetlock, a professor at the University of California, Berkley published a book called, “Expert Political Judgment” based on two decades of tracking some 82,000 predictions by 284 experts. The result? The predictions of experts were, on average only a tiny bit better than random guesses – “the equivalent,” says Nicholas Kristoff, “of a chimpanzee throwing darts at a board. It made no difference whether participants had doctorates, whether they were economists, political scientists, journalists or historians, whether they had policy experience or access to classified information, or whether they had logged many or few years of experience,” Prof. Tetlock wrote. Some of them were optimists, some of them were pessimists – but the one thing these experts shared was a conviction that they knew what was going to happen. Only problem was they didn’t. Their predictions were slightly better than random guesses. Indeed, the only consistent predictor of their accuracy in predicting events was fame --- and it was an inverse relationship. The more famous experts did worse than the unknown ones. It seems that what gets you booked on these news shows and talk radio interviews, what gets you quoted in newspapers and online blogs is if you can say things forcefully, authoritatively and clearly, it doesn’t really matter if you are optimistic or pessimistic as long as you are confident – the more black and white you can make it – the more likely you are to be featured – *AND* – according to Professor Tetlock – the more likely you are to be wrong. And the more you shout – well – then you might get your own show. Those who were absolutely positively sure that they knew the future – optimistically or pessimistically – were equally mistaken in their clear and unequivocal predictions. They were often wrong, but never in doubt.

And it was precisely their absence of doubt – their focused worldview, their strong convictions that got them quoted, made them attractive guests – but, if the good professor’s study is correct, also made them more likely to be wrong. While those who were more cautious, more centrist, more likely to adjust their views, more pragmatic, more prone to self doubt, more inclined to see complexity and nuance – were more likely to be right, but less likely to be featured on these shows.

Newspaper reporters don’t like me. Can you guess why? When they call to get my opinion on an issue, almost any issue I will reply: “well the answer to your question is actually quite complicated...” Reporters don’t like complicated. CNN’s Morning America did a report on Jews and tattoos. Since I wrote the paper on tattooing and body piercing for the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement the reporter found her way to my office. She began by saying that she had read my rather extensive paper on the subject, would I be able to summarize it on camera in 10-15 seconds? It took me only 3 seconds to reply, “No, I cannot.” She smiled and said, well then why don’t you do the best you can, and

we'll edit it back at the station.” (search alanblucas CNN Interview on Youtube if you want to see the results)

The Middle East is one of the most complicated places in the world – but the world doesn't do complicated – so instead we get theater as we did with Abbas' appearance at the UN and the recent call for the establishment of a Palestinian State without peace negotiations between the parties.

Most Israelis, even my reasonably leftish friends – no longer believe that the Palestinians want a two state solution. Once upon a time Israelis believed in land for peace – they were willing to trade land – like they did with Egypt, for peace. But after their experiences in Gaza and Lebanon most Israelis no longer believe in land for peace. But the Palestinians now seem to believe in the possibility of land without peace, that they can get a land without making peace with Israel. They could have had a land of their own in 1948, but they were not willing to make peace with Israel so they chose to go to war in the hope of driving the Jews into the sea. And even if we don't resort to ancient history – Israelis will patiently list Camp David 2000, where Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered Yasser Arafat a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza — and the previously inconceivable division of Jerusalem - for peace. Taba 2001, where an even sweeter deal was offered - for peace. 2008, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered 100 percent of the West Bank (with land swaps), Palestinian statehood, the division of Jerusalem with the Muslim parts becoming the capital of the new Palestine, for peace. And he offered to turn over the city's holy places, including the Western Wall to an international body on which sit Jordan and Saudi Arabia. None of this bore any fruit – and now the Palestinians are hopeful that the UN will be able to deliver them their land without any need to make peace with Israel.

“Don't like Netanyahu?” my Israeli friends will say, “neither do many of us – but the majority of Israelis no longer believe the Palestinians are serious about peace and as a result he has become the man for our times. In their speeches at the UN, both Netanyahu and Abbas played to their own constituencies but, as I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, at least Netanyahu was able to acknowledge the right of the Palestinians to live in a land of their own. Abbas exhibited total and utter disregard for the core concerns of the Israelis. When Mahmoud Abbas spoke at the UN, he spoke repeatedly of needing to end 63 years of occupation. 63 years of occupation? As in 1948? Those not so subtle code words indicate that Abbas will not be satisfied with Jenin and Ramallah. He will not be satisfied until we end 63 years of occupation and get out of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa! When Abbas makes a point of speaking of this land being the source of Christianity and the home of sacred shrines of Islam but intentionally ignores the Biblical roots of Judaism and Jerusalem as the home of Hebrew kings and prophets and this from the most moderate of Palestinian leaders. When it was left for Netanyahu to point out that the very name Jew has its roots in the land of Judea is it any wonder Israelis believe the Palestinians are not ready to embrace any notion of a Jewish state. When confronted with this omission later, Abbas responded that to acknowledge a Jewish state would be to betray the 1.5 million Palestinian citizens of Israel. Israelis long believed that Palestinian insistence on the “right of return” was merely a negotiating chip that would be dealt away at the proper time and under the proper circumstances – now they are no longer sure when as recently as last week Abbas affirmed, we may recognize Israel but we will never recognize a Jewish state. What has dawned on most Israelis is that this is not a real-estate dispute. It is not about finding a place for two peoples to live on the same disputed land. But a final peace agreement would mean Palestinians and Arabs making peace with the right of a Jewish State to exist period. And at this juncture they just do not seem prepared or capable of

doing that.

So given this bleak landscape – is it any wonder that the cynics are celebrating and the pessimists are pontificating? They may think they know what the future holds – but as a person of faith, as a person of Jewish faith – I continue to believe in the possibility of the improbable.

It is easy to be a pessimist when times are tough. The real challenge is to have faith, to believe in the possibility of the improbable when times are as tough as this – and that is what I am asking you to consider tonight.

Allow me to introduce you to one of my Jewish heroes. He lived some 3200 years ago, yet we know his name – it was Nachshon ben Aminadav, who at the time was the leader of the tribe of Judah. He and his family participated in one of the greatest moments of Jewish history – the exodus from Egypt. He was there to witness the drama of the 10 plagues, he was there to witness Moses lead the people into freedom after 400 years of slavery. But he was also there when it all threatened to come to an abrupt and tragic end when, at the last minute, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his chariots out to bring the Hebrews back to slavery. You remember the moment – the Israelites were trapped between the sea and Pharaoh's rapidly approaching troops. They began to panic – "Is this why you brought us out of Egypt Moses? So we could die in the wilderness? Were there not enough graves there that you had to bring us here?" Their situation appeared hopeless and not surprisingly the pessimists were having a field day taunting Moses and mocking God. Even poor Moses was not sure what to do and cried out to the Lord. And the Bible says that God responded and said, "*Hityatzvu* – stand firm, and you will now see the salvation of the Lord, stretch out your staff over the water and it will split and you and the people will pass through on dry land!" Sound crazy? Must have sounded more than a little nutty to our ancestors as well – but it was not like they had a whole lot of options – so their heads swiveled towards the sea as they watched hopefully as Moses stretched his arm over the water – and then according to the midrash – nothing happened. *Zilch. Efes Nada.* And before the cynics could even utter the first, "I told you so!" One Nachshon ben Aminadav, leader of the tribe of Judah, our hero – began walking into the sea. Can you imagine that moment? Picture it if you can. Pharaoh's horsemen closing at full speed – the thunderous sound of hoof beats, the earth shaking from their approach, the soldiers so close the people had to do everything within their power not to panic. Moses standing with his arm stretched out over the sea – the sea unmoved, calm, and impenetrable. And then one lone man – walking into the water. The midrash describes how the water came up to his ankles – but nothing happened. He kept walking, now it was up to his waist. Nothing happened. Now it was up to his neck - still nothing happened. Finally – just as the waters were about to cover his nose – at the very moment he was about to drown – the sea split and what happened was the greatest miracle in the history of the world – two great walls of water, and Nachshon kept walking and the people followed him across to safety on the other side.

Now the midrash version of this story is probably very different than the way you had imagined it. You probably remember it something like --- 1. Troops advance, Jews stuck between them and the sea 2. Sea splits 3. Jews pass through safely. Why do the rabbis imagine it differently? Why do they have Nachson enter the sea *before* it split?

Because the Jewish notion of miracles is very different from what many people believe. Most people insist – first comes the miracle then comes faith. The rabbis are suggesting – that first comes faith – and then miracles happen.

When Moses announced that God would split the sea – most of the people were appropriately skeptical. But one man had faith in the possibility of the improbable. He committed himself to that possibility – he literally walked into the sea until the water was almost over his head – had he stood with the rest of them on the shore – the miracle might never have happened.

Do I believe in miracles? That is the question your children ask me most often. Although it usually is framed more cynically, “Rabbi do you really believe in miracles – like in the Bible?” It is always so sad when I realize that they have become so cynical at such a young age. I look them right in the eye; I smile and reply – “I most certainly do, I absolutely believe in miracles.”

But the miracles I believe in are not supernatural – they are quite natural – they happen every day – they are the same kind of miracles our rabbinic ancestors believed in – miracles are not waiting for the impossible but the belief in the possibility of the improbable.

I know you - and I know where you are tempted to go from here. Pessimism is built into the modern Jewish psyche. Definition #152 of a Jew: “A Jew is someone who sees a cloud to every silver lining.” Maybe this is a little bit harsh but not by much. For there is a clear tendency amongst us Jews, to be more than a little cynical. From Lenny Bruce to the Marx Brothers, from Woody Allen and Mel Brooks and Larry David - there is an edge to Jewish humor that is hard to deny. But then again, to have experienced what we have experienced over our long and difficult history – it is a miracle we are not more cynical. But, no matter how tempting has been the path of cynicism there has always been a fundamental sense of faith that has always trumped our cynicism and if we do not, if we cannot tap into that sense of hope - we have a greater enemy to overcome than the Palestinians.

Time and time again in our long and fateful history - we have stood at pivotal moments such as this. And time and time again we made the right choice, even though it was not the easy choice and certainly not the obvious choice. 3500 years ago, at the shore of the Red Sea nothing less than a miracle could save us - and then, well you know what happened - a miracle did save us!

2500 years ago, the Babylonians conquered our land and destroyed our Temple, there were again those who were eager to give up, it had been a good run, but it was time for an honest assessment - no nation in human history up until that point - (and since, by the way) had ever survived the destruction of their land. End of land, end of people, that's the way it worked. In fact their words are preserved by the prophet Ezekiel when they came up to him and said: “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost. We are doomed.” I mean, only a miracle could have saved them at that point. And then, well you know what happened - a miracle did save them. *Al naharot baveyl, sham yashavnu, v'bachainu, v'zachreinu et zion - “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept - but we remembered Zion!”* Yep, we remembered and we did what no nation has ever done before - we returned to our land and we rebuilt our Temple and we refused to die!

2000 years ago, then it was the Romans who conquered our land and for a second time our Temple was destroyed and this time we would be exiled to the four corners of the earth. So, no big surprise that once again there were those who were ready to admit defeat. These Jews, the rabbis tell us, stopped eating meat and drinking wine. They felt the end of the Jewish people had arrived and they were ready to begin a national period of mourning for the death of their once great faith. Rabbi Yehoshua chastised those who were tempted to declare defeat -

he said: "We must not, we may not give way to despair; there are always possibilities, there are always potentialities that exist - exigencies of which we may not be aware, opportunities that we may not see." But, the pessimists could have retorted - this is no ordinary defeat! It will be more than two thousand years that we will have to live homeless and persecuted. No one can keep a dream alive that long! No one can keep the faith in so many lands in so many languages enduring so much hate and so much suffering for such a long period of time - it would take a miracle.

But, miracles 'R Us. That is just the way we Jews do business.

See that path? That road that leads to pessimism, despair and defeat - don't go there - don't you dare go there. We've been tempted by that road before, more times than I care to recount - but that is not our path. That has never been our path.

Pharaohs come and pharaohs go. Emperors rise and emperors fall. Crises come and crises go and we have survived them all. And we will survive this challenge as well - and we will survive it by doing what Jews have always done - *yisrael B'tach Badonia!* We will place our faith in God! We will substitute pessimism with hope and defeat with the abiding faith that nothing can defeat our sacred mission - and if all it takes is another miracle - well we've been there before.

You thought it was amusing when I defined a Jew as one who sees a cloud to every silver lining? Well, let me give you a better definition of who we really are - definition #153 Jews: the people who were massacred and decimated time and time again throughout a long and noble history, a people who lost 1/3 of its entire population in the Holocaust - a people castigated and censured by the world - yet still founded a homeland in the face of overwhelming odds and have defended that homeland for more than 60 years despite the scorn and animosity of all of its Arab neighbors. Jews, a people who despite all we have witnessed and all we have experienced chose for *our* national anthem - a song that is built around a single theme - captured in its one word title: *Hatikvah* - The Hope!" That, my friends, is my definition of a Jew!

Is it not a miracle that we Jews sit here today? After all that we have been through? Is it not a miracle that there is a State of Israel? The chances of all these things happening? At least 280 million to one – but here we are. Why give up on faith now?

Yes there is much going on in the world over which we have no control – but there is a lot we can influence. The urgencies of the moment do not allow us the teeth gnashing of the pessimists or the wide eyed dreams of the optimists – what these challenging times call for is the kind of hard work and political savvy that has been the hallmark of our people for thousands of years. It is time for people of good faith to push the optimists *and* the pessimists off the stage and take control of the agenda.

The pessimists say the UN Initiative is the worst thing ever to happen – the optimists try and convince us it is the best thing to happen. I say it is happening and our job is to minimize the damage it causes and maximize the opportunity it could create.

The cynics say there has never been a greater enemy than this president, while the optimists say there has never been a greater friend than this president – and I say the debate is silly – because what is clearly emerging is that the President of the United States whoever he or she is - may well be Israel's *only* friend – and our job as American Jews is to be smart. Our job is to cultivate, educate, and encourage this President to pursue those courses of action we believe

are in Israel's best interest. That is why now more than ever we must support AIPAC, and now more than ever we must be strong and united. Is there no room for debate? Is there no room for criticism of Israel's policies? Of course, and anyone who comes to this synagogue on a regular basis knows we are not afraid of real and honest debate – take the recent panel we sponsored that not only featured Prof. Moshe Halbertal but also the Palestinian Gaith Olmari – but there is a difference between the internal debates – the family squabbles, if you will, and the fundamental solidarity that binds all Jews – especially in times of crisis.

Another thing you can do is go to Israel. Our Israeli brothers and sisters are feeling so isolated, the least we can do is visit and give them a little *hizuk* – it will nourish your soul as well. I am leading a congregational trip that departs on December 22 and returning Jan 1 – there is still room to join us, the Cantor is leading a trip in June.

Also we must support those organizations that support Israel – UJA/Federation, JNF, Israel Bonds and don't forget the shul – we have a well-deserved reputation as a leading voice for Israel in our community.

My friends – I understand the attraction of cynicism – we live in a moment where cynicism and pessimism are oh so tempting. But we Jews are not cynics. Cynics do not celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with its inherent message of hope for a better new year despite the difficulties of the past year. Cynics would never observe Yom Kippur – they would take one look at our broken, fragmented lives and tell us it is hopeless – we will never change. But when you walked in *this* door – you rejected that approach – you embraced a much more hopeful way of looking at the world – one that is not afraid to confront reality in all its brutal detail – but remains convinced that *af al pi cheyn v'lamrot hakol* – tomorrow can and will be better. My friends, it is going to take a lot of hard work to make things better, in our lives and in our world – but when have we Jews been afraid of a little hard work?

God willing in a few months I will board a plane and head for Israel – I will walk the streets of a vital and vibrant Jewish state – filled with challenges and problems yes – but filled with life and vitality. I will sit with my friends in cafes and we will argue politics and bemoan the difficulty of being a Jew – but we will laugh and celebrate the sheer wonder and miracle of the modern State of Israel. In a sad and depressing few weeks it is important to remember that we are a fortunate and blessed generation – what your ancestors would have given for the privilege to wrestle with the challenges and problems of a Jewish state. I invite you to please rise and join me in the singing of *Hatikvah* – *od lo avda tkvateynu* – we have not yet lost our hope, not even close.