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Congregation Betenu
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My friend's 5-year-old nephew Elijah squeezed the red eft between his stubby fingers with delightful zeal. He looked up at me and exclaimed,

"I found another one!" I glanced down at the small orange newt whose eyes bulged uncomfortably from Elijah's vice-like grip.

"Wow," I said as I feared for the life of this miserable newt, "Nice find! Just be careful not to squeeze too hard."

"I'm not!" Elijah responded, barely loosening his grip. I made myself wait another moment before I suggested that Elijah put the newt down so it could return to its home. He finally, though somewhat grumpily released his newfound prized possession. We kept our eyes peeled as we resumed our hike up the leaf-covered trail. It wasn't long before we stumbled on another red eft. Poor creature, I thought, as yet again Elijah eagerly grasped it, proudly displaying his new newt, identical to the last. When I again warned him not to hold the newt for too long, Elijah declared,

"I will keep it, just until I find the next one." So, we paced our journey not by our footsteps but by each newt who travelled with us. And there were many. One after another, Elijah dropped the old newt in favor of the next new one. He was content with his prolific newt-collecting and I was grateful that he only had the chance to torture each one for a couple of minutes.

At the turning of this new year, what rings in my ear is Elijah's confident declaration, "I will keep it, just until I find the next one." He trusted in that moment that there would always be more newts along his path. Even though he had not yet hiked further ahead, he was sure he would encounter another newt, then another and another. His five-year-old clarity struck me so profoundly because of the glaring uncertainty we face daily, have had to face every day for the past eighteen months, and will continue to encounter in the days, weeks and months ahead. While this uncertainty is not new, this past year-and-a-half has called upon us to reckon even more deeply with it.

Perhaps some of us never were like Elijah; we never really let ourselves trust that goodness would continue to cross our paths, whether in the form of a little orange newt, loving relationships with friends and family, or a secure retirement. Perhaps some of us have found it easy to be as sure as Elijah, trusting that the world would continually rise up to meet us, only to have that surety thwarted over the past eighteen months. Whatever our natural disposition, standing now at the head of this new year, I want to invite all of us to try to be like Elijah, to step into the part of ourselves that can believe that the path ahead is scattered with treasures waiting for us to discover them.

And, I recognize that this is not an easy task.

A biblical text many Jewish communities read on Rosh Hashanah is the story of Hagar, an Egyptian slave, who was cast out of the home of Sarah and Abraham with her son Ishmael. She wanders in the desert with her child, bereft and despairing. When she runs out of water, she lays her son under a bush to die. Then, an angel of God hears the boy's cries and tells her everything is going to be alright. Suddenly, God opens her eyes and shows her a well, where she goes to retrieve water for her son.

Despite Hagar and Ishmael's harrowing journey, despite the trauma of their near-death experience, they survive and in fact, they thrive. This story has always been dear to me and this year I read it as a narrative that might help guide us from despair to hope.

Notably we read, **וַיִּפְתַּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּרְאֶה בְּאֵר מַיִם**, "God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water." (Genesis 21:19). In the midst of her grief, Hagar had not been able to see the well. We do not know whether the well had already been there, or if it appeared once God heeded the boy's cries. What we do know is that Hagar needed the help of another, in this case God, to open her eyes for her so that she could see the life-giving well close by. This divine act insists that we need the support of one other in order to see goodness in the world around us.

I experienced this during my summer chaplaincy internship at a nursing home. I spoke with a resident there who had survived COVID this past spring. He said, "You know, I got the virus. I was so sick. They had to move me to a different site where they were treating people with the COVID. Five of us from this household ended up there, all together, at the same time! And we all survived. I felt like my community was with me. It was incredible!" For this man, he was able to transform what could have been a story defined by great suffering and fear into one of comfort, because of his neighbors who accompanied him in the journey.

When we encounter Hagar in the desert, we could see her too as one who suffers. She has been banished from her home, persecuted by Abraham and Sarah and seems to finally run out of options to keep her son and herself safe. Over the course of this pandemic, many of us have also come to identify with our suffering. We may have felt, and might continue to feel, powerless and alone.

For Hagar, a shift occurs when God empowers her to take an active role in her own redemption. God coaches her, gives her advice, helps her take the first step, but then she does it on her own. We read that she picks up her son, she walks to the well. What would it look like for us to model this relationship of empowerment, for ourselves and for others as we welcome the new year? Despite our exhaustion, our overwhelm, our longing, our despair, what or who might give each of us the courage to create the world we want to live in? In other words, how can we cultivate hope?

I do not mean that we should draw silver linings around our pain, around the extensive suffering of so many in the world today. Sometimes, hope can feel like yet another way for us to push aside suffering. It can feel like skipping an important step of the process between pain and healing. This was the kind of hope I used to encounter often. However, in the last few years, hope and I have gotten to know each other a bit better.

Activist and writer Rebecca Solnit describes hope when she writes, “Thus it is that the world often seems divided between false hope and gratuitous despair. Despair demands less of us, it’s more predictable, and in a sad way safer. Authentic hope requires clarity- seeing the troubles in this world- and imagination, seeing what might lie beyond these situations that are perhaps not inevitable or immutable.”

Authentic hope is deeply rooted in the world around us. Unlike denial or despair which gives us permission to retreat from the world, hope can be a means by which to continue to engage in it. Hope is the mechanism that bridges *Olam hazeh*, the earthly world we inhabit and *Olam habah*, a promising future that we long for. Hope, then, is a creative act, one that only arises from our vulnerability and courage to imagine what might be possible, either with help from others, or through transforming our own pain

With 5 year-old Elijah and his newts in mind, I also sense the natural world as a partner in forging hope. Nature offers itself as a locus of hope in large part because of all of its small gestures of growth and transition, whether they are an inch-worm’s descent or another year-long

eighth-of-an-inch ring around a tree. There is a determination, a gentle and constant plodding ever forward, that for me, embodies hope. And we can deepen this hope when we remember that even when the trajectory is not linear, even when we slip down the slope into the valleys of denial or despair, we are all limbs of this natural body that slowly, steadily, infinitely opens to new growth and possibility.

Just as Elijah trusted that he would discover more newts along his path because he had already passed so many, may each of us trust in our ability to find our way through the unknown because of the great distance we have already journeyed.

This year, may we actively, against all odds, cultivate visions of authentic hope

And may we continue to lift up one another's eyes in order to recognize the life-giving wells around us.

L'Shana Tovah Umetukah— to a year sweetened with goodness and

G'mar Chatimah Tovah— may we all be sealed for good, for health, and for life.