

## Finding optimism in the face of chaos – Rabbi Stephen Wise

We are here enjoying the beautiful autumn, but let's think back a few months, to the end of spring, to June, school was ending, everyone was looking forward to sun, swimming and family trips. We felt that the chaotic events of the winter were finally over and we could look forward to a few months of calm, even some good news, with the Summer Olympics to look forward to.

But unfortunately summer began with a violent bang. First there was the night club shooting in Orlando, a targeted attack against the Lgbt community with young people gunned to death while they danced. Then there were brutal police attacks against young black people, followed by the inevitable acts of revenge in Baton Rouge, St Paul and Dallas.

Jacob and I were in the American south in July on a baseball road trip with his team and got caught up in it. As we were driving into Dallas we were informed that the man who killed a policeman had escaped to a downtown Dallas hotel. Jacob asked me where we were staying. "Wait a second", I told him, "we're staying at a downtown Dallas hotel". When we found roadblocks near our hotel we decided maybe we could find a different hotel – right Cheryl.

Jacob's friend Herman said. "I used to hear about bad news in America but never worried because we live in Canada. Then I thought, what are we doing here in America." But it wasn't just America. Perhaps all we needed to do to find peace was to glance across the ocean to Europe. But alas, more of the same doom and gloom. An attack on innocent people at a Bastille Day celebration in Nice, civil war in Syria, refugees streaming across the continent, Turkey fighting a military coup, right wing parties gaining traction everywhere, the Zika virus. What is happening to the world? One US presidential nominee, building on these fears, announced that his plan would be to deport all immigrants, and build a wall around America to keep the bad people out. The best idea seemed to be retreating into our own little protective bubble. It got to the point where you didn't want to turn on the new, read a newspaper or go on the Internet.

While there is no denying there's a lot of bad news in the world, a lot of it is perception more than reality. If we think the world has gone crazy, we see only more negativity, we fear what might come next and we close ourselves off. Shawn Achor, Harvard professor and author of "the Happiness advantage" agrees, that if we focus on accidents and murders and corruption, it tricks our brains into believing that this is reality, that life is negative. Like the medical student who learns about new diseases each week and becomes convinced she is dying.

But if we can change our perspective and open up our mind to more options we can see the positives. In fact if we focus on the good stories, we feel better and we actually act better. Research is beginning to reveal that positive thinking is about much more than just being happy or displaying an upbeat attitude. Positive thoughts can actually create real value in your life and help you build skills that last much longer than a smile. According to Barbara Fredrickson, a positive psychology researcher at the University of North Carolina, negative emotions narrow your mind, by shutting off the outside world and limiting the options you see around you. But when you are experiencing positive emotions like joy, contentment, and love, you will see more possibilities in your life. Happiness fuels success, when we are positive our brains become more engaged, creative, motivated, energetic, resilient and productive. These findings were among the first that suggested positive emotions broaden your sense of possibility and open your mind up to more options and more hope – to reap the benefits of a happier mindset to achieve the extraordinary in our lives.

When you think about it, Judaism knows the happiness advantage, and continually offers unabashed optimism. We were slaves in Egypt but don't worry, God will get us out. When we were with Mo-

ses in the desert without food or water, we didn't worry, manna will fall from heaven. This is the doctrine of bitachon, or trust in Gd, which the chassidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789–1866) distilled as the Yiddish proverb, Tracht gut, vet zein gut—"Think good, and it will be good." What this means, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe, is that bitachon, the absolute assurance and conviction that Gd will make things good, actually becomes the conduit and vessel which draw down and receive Gd's blessings. Positive thinking is not just a way to weather negative occurrences, but actually makes positive results happen. As the Talmud says, עשיר-השמח בחלקו איזה הוא  
Who is rich? one who is happy with his or her lot. We have so much to be happy about, why focus on the negative on what you don't have, you are rich because of the life you already have.

Thus when we read the news of violent crime, terrorism, shootings, virus, wars and refugees, we feel the world is chaotic and we retreat and close ourselves off. If on the other hand we focus on the freedoms we have, on the overall drop in crime, on refugees finding homes, on breakthroughs in medicine and treatment, our minds open more to the possibilities of life.

When rehearsals started for the current Broadway revival in New York City of Fiddler on the Roof, searing and heartbreaking images of Syrian refugees were everywhere. The actors in the show right away saw parallels between today's refugees and the townspeople of Anatevka? Here they are doing a show about the shtetl but the Syrians dying in Europe was reality - art was imitating life. Instead of feeling powerless, perhaps there was something they could do. As Lonnie Firestone reported in Tablet mag it started with Jessica Hecht, who plays Tevye's wife Golde, proposed a weekly fundraising drive. She and her dresser, Erin Roth, began baking desserts, selling them backstage, and donating the money to refugee-support organizations. Then the entire cast jumped in. Adam Kantor, who plays the tailor Motel said, 'We're really passionate about the refugee crisis. Our show is about a group of people who become displaced. Why can't we give a percentage of what we raise toward helping refugees around the world?' The cast raised \$65,000. Its not the first time that a Broadway cast has used its considerable clout and fame to organize a charitable giving campaign. in the 1980's when the AIDS Crisis first began, Broadway Cares was established to help victims, many of whom were in the musical theatre industry in NYC and they continue to raise funds for multiple causes year after year. The cast and crew of Fiddler continue to donate on a weekly basis towards refugee causes.

I'm impressed with the sincerity and compassion that these actors display towards a cause. When you inhabit a role on stage, you begin to see the world through the character and thus see the world in a new way. When you act the part of a refugee, cast out of your home for no reason, given a day to pack your belongings and leave, unsure of your next destination- you feel the pain and fear. These actors decided to do something about it, raising money, raising awareness and getting personally involved. It would be easy to just act out the show for three hours and go home. But they are in front of thousands of people every single day, sometimes twice a day, with a captive audience that would be receptive to giving and have the funds to help. Kudos to the cast of Fiddler for their positivity in opening their minds and their wallets towards a good cause.

Though the summer Olympics started out with a whimper over unclean water and doping athletes, there were some moments that restored my faith in the world and put some of the shards of chaos back together. In the parade of nations entering the opening ceremonies was for the first time a unique group that didn't have a nation to represent, the first ever Olympic refugee team. A year before Syrian Yusra Mardini was swimming for her life when her lifeboat started to sink as she tried to reach Europe. She helped pull the boat for three hours through the night saving the lives of 19 others. "When I was in the water there was fear. You don't know whether you are going to live or die," the 18-year-old said. Yusra knew her swimming could save her own life and she couldn't let the rest of the people drown. She swam at Rio in a pool for the joy of competition, no pressure to win nor the weight of 19 lives on her back.

I was also moved by the 5000 meter race when a runner stopped to help a fallen athlete in a true demonstration of sportsmanship. New Zealand's Nikki Hamblin fell and accidentally tripped up Abbey D'Agostino of the United States. With Hamblin lying on the ground, D'Agostino turned around to help the prone New Zealander to her feet and together they finished the race. D'Agostino, twisted her right knee in the collision, and was only able to limp the rest of the way but the pair hugged at the finish line after finishing well back from the rest of the field. Hamblin was quick to thank the American after the race, saying: "That girl is the Olympic spirit right there. I went down and I was like 'what's happening? Why am I on the ground?' "Then suddenly this hand on my shoulder, like 'get up, get up, we have to finish this' and I was like, 'yep, you're right'. This is the Olympic Games - we have to finish this. "I've never met this girl before, and isn't that just so amazing, such an amazing woman.

That is focusing on the positive, Hamlin and D'agostino didn't come close to a medal but left as winners.

If the world needs more positive thinking, what the world needs is more Canada. That is U2's Bono said at the Liberal Party convention. We may not have a perfect country but many people feel our country is a success. Our Prime Minister has left a very great impression on us and on others. He opened the doors to refugees when many countries were closing them. He's restored a sense of optimism for the future. Trudeau has been seen this summer hiking shirtless in the mountains and photo bombing a wedding. He has been seen in every pride parade and attended the final tragically hip concert. what does that say. If you want a prime minister who sees his mandate to stay in a bunker and fight terror he might disappoint you. But in my view he exemplifies optimism and happiness. He's out there living life to the fullest as each Canadian should. What a way to take fear and turn it around.

The high point of this summer might have been that tragically hip concert and it was a uniquely Canadian moment. As we know, Gord Downie, the lead singer was diagnosed with Glioblastoma, an aggressive form of incurable brain cancer that generally claims its victims in less than a year. Instead of quietly succumbing to the disease, The Hip rallied for one last hurrah going out in a way that only great Canadian icons can. They toured. The Kingson K-Rock Centre only holds 6000 people but it was a fitting venue for their final show. More than 20,000 fans gathered outside the arena to watch on the big screen while the rest of Canada watched from coast to coast. The CBC, our Olympic national broadcasting network pre-empted their primetime coverage of the Olympic Games from Rio to broadcast live from Kingston, Ontario giving up millions in revenue and ad space so that Canadians could say goodbye to their most beloved band. They had an entire country watching their every breath. While our neighbors to the south suffer scandal after scandal and the world seems more divided than ever, Canada came together as a nation to watch a rock concert. As Americans riot at political rallies, Canadians sing and cry together en masse celebrating what we love about this country. Our unity. As the world is more divided than ever, Canada proved that one nation can stand together to celebrate greatness.

That's a wonderful message for us on these high holidays. We can look back at a chaotic and sometimes violent world and succumb to fear and pessimism about the future. Or we can turn back to the Jewish wisdom that is over 4000 years old, and say Tracht gut, vet zein gut—"Think good, and it will be good." We can look forward to a good year ahead, Shana Tova U'metukah – may this be a sweet and wonderful year for you and your family.

Shana Tova.