

When in 1897 Theodore Herzl called for delegates to come to a First Zionist Congress, no one believed there was any prospect of a modern state of Israel. Herzl rented a large hall, without knowing if anyone would show up. And yet a few months later, after about 200 participants from 17 countries attended the gathering, he was able to say that in Basle he founded the Jewish state and predict that within 50 years his dream would be fulfilled. Only 69 of those present actually represented existing Zionist groups, still Herzl was pretty much on the mark. The modern state of Israel was established in 1948, its Independence Day will be celebrated this Sunday night and Monday. And the song sung first at that conference, Hatikvah, the Hope, became Israel's national anthem.

For me the most important message of Reese's Haftarah portion, that strange story about the 4 lepers who believed, with reason, that their life span would be very limited, is about hope and about how things can turn around in unexpected ways. That message about hope and trust in a better future is found throughout Jewish teachings and culture. It is an old message with its origins at the very beginning of the story of the Jews, and a message that continues to resonate. And just like the words of the lepers, that their city had been delivered, it is a message that is frequently hard to have confidence in.

Consider the story of our people. Who would have believed, based on how things usually worked in the ancient Middle East, that the Israelite slaves would be freed from Egyptian bondage?

Who would have believed that a people that was conquered by the Babylonians, its capital Jerusalem in ruins, its inhabitants taken into Exile, would still exist 2,500 hundred years later?

In dealing with some of the arcane rituals found in the book of Leviticus like the ritual of the purification of the leper, that Reese read today, the rabbis noted that the rituals that don't make sense in a certain way. That which is impure- in this case blood, is also used as a purifying agent. Noting this paradox, the rabbis argue that it is meant to open our eyes to other paradoxes. Purity can emerge from impurity, they argue. Mordechai, the great hero of the Purim story, was the son of an evil man- Shimi. Similarly the best of the kings of ancient Judea was Hezekiah the son of wicked king Ahaz. And finally, someday, they write, a world of justice and peace, will, paradoxically, emerge from the mess we see around us.

Last month Rabbi Postrel spoke about the questions that the Talmud believed would be our final exam, that is the questions our souls would be asked as we

depart this world. The last in this sequence of questions, Did you anticipate redemption, seems to hinge on the question of hope.

That same impulse to hope is what gives us the Scripture reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the story of a barren old woman, Sarah, giving birth to laughter, her son Isaac. It is also, in a sense part of God's introduction to us at Mt Sinai. I am Adonai your God, who brought you forth from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. The unexpected can happen, a positive turn around can come even where extremely unlikely.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, argues that hope is something more than optimism. He writes: "Optimism is the belief, that things will get better. Hope is the belief, that if we work hard enough, we can make things better. Between them lies all the difference in the world."

Herzl did not just have a dream, he worked a dream. Similarly in the Haftarah, the lepers had to pick themselves up and go to the King. The world does not get better from some inner magic. History moves forward, but each advance contains harm as well as good, even advanced societies can lapse into barbarism as we saw in the 20th century, so we recognize that it is more than positive thinking that we need. As Sacks concludes on this theme of Jewish hope: "IT means seeing the

world exactly as it is and yet not giving up on the belief that it could be otherwise, if we are ready to act with others to make it so. It is realism touched by faith, and it has the power to transform the world.”