



# The importance of hope for contemporary Jews



KRISTA GUENIN/FICKR

'I think that hope is a choice. The easiest thing is to be cynical, pessimistic. There are lots of bad signs. But things could be a lot worse.'

**FOR THE** past 15 months, Jews in Israel and the Diaspora have been mired in despair, due to the rise of the most extreme and irresponsible government in Israel's history, the ongoing wars between Israel and its neighbors, and the fact that all the hostages who were taken by Hamas on October 7, 2023, have not yet been redeemed. It has been very difficult to find any signs of hope lately, except for the recent agreement reached indirectly between Israel and Hamas, through the mediation of representatives of the governments of the US, Egypt, and Qatar, which has brought home from Gaza the first hostages since November 2023.

That is why I was so happy to come across *Choosing Hope: The Heritage of Judaism*, a beautiful book about hope written by one of America's most talented Jewish writers. David Arnow is a learned layman, who has studied with many of North America's and Israel's best teachers. He is also a trained psychologist. In this wonderful book, he brings his understanding of both Judaism and psychology to bear on the topic at hand.

Not only does this book offer well-researched and carefully thought-out ideas for why to choose to be hopeful, and how to act upon our choices, but it also offers a brilliant and concise theology of hope

which can be useful for us now during these times of so much darkness, despair, and denial.

## Defining hope: More than optimism

Arnow begins the book by offering his own understanding of hope: "Hope reflects our embrace of the possibility of a particular, deeply desired future, and hope fuels our actions to help bring it about."

In his introduction, he elaborates on what he means by hope and how it is different than other terms, such as "faith" or "optimism":

"Hope is not the same as faith in God or how likely we consider a particular outcome to be. Hope is about the energy and determination we are willing to invest in making that outcome happen, whether it is likely or not....Hope can be distinguished from optimism, which does not require action and solely expresses one's estimation that a desired outcome is likely; and from wishes and dreams, perhaps best understood as hope shorn of action. Hope, alternatively, rests on two underlying beliefs: reality can change, and our actions can help change it."

I very much liked his emphasis on action. In my own work in interreligious dialogue as part of peacebuilding over the past three decades, I have always

stressed that dialogue is not enough; dialogue must lead to action, to changing things for the better. So it is with hope. It is not enough to have a hopeful attitude or demeanor. Rather, one must do something with it by creating an action plan and working for positive change.


## Jewish traditions of hope

Arnow's book has many chapters which demonstrate clearly the Jewish tradition's commitment to hope. These chapters include excellent explorations of important concepts such as repentance, *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world"), the Exodus, the Covenant and Jewish eschatology and how they demonstrate how hope permeates our Jewish heritage. For me, the most interesting parts of this book are the ones that deal with Israel, Jewish humor, and with Arnow's theology of hope.

## Voices of hope

In Arnow's reflections on Israel, I particularly like the fact that Arnow interviewed several leading figures in civil society in Israel to show how these people and their organizations keep hope alive, despite many obstacles and challenges. Among the people he interviewed and wrote about are Eilon Schwartz, executive director of Shalom: Creating





Common Cause; Alice Shalvi (of blessed memory), educator and founder of the Israel Women's Network and of the Pel-ech High School for Girls in Jerusalem; Rabbi Tamar Elad Applebaum, founder of the Tzion Community (synagogue) in Jerusalem and co-founder of the Beit Midrash for Israeli Rabbis of the Hartman Institute and the Midrasha of Oranim College.

Eilon Schwartz, who is the founder of Shaharit, "a synergistic mix of think tank, leadership incubator, and community organizing hub," who also teaches courses on cultural criticism, social-environmental politics and education at Hebrew University's Melton Center, states:

"I think that hope is a choice. The easiest thing is to be cynical, pessimistic. There are lots of bad signs. But things could be a lot worse. So how do you want to see the glass? Half empty or half full? My hope is grounded. It's not naivete or Pollyannaish optimism. Hope for me is a reasonable position, based on a reasoned look at the world, the good and the bad."

I found this comment to be fascinating, especially because there is so much cynicism and pessimism in Israel and the Diaspora these days. Schwartz's notion of hope is realistic, not dreamy or naïve.

Similarly, Alice Shalvi's views on hope were a mixture of her personality and her professional experience:

"I am hopelessly hopeful. Sometimes I feel I'm being too Pollyannaish, but I don't think that one can go on living a purposeful life without hope. One thinks one can make some progress in the world. And that been very essential in my life. I tend to be sad more than I used to be, but that's because the hopes have still not yet been fulfilled... One of the things that gives me hope is civil society, the people and the organizations. Their unflinching dedication."

I was fortunate to know Alice Shalvi. We partnered in my work in civil society in Israel via interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding through an organization which I founded and directed for 24 years called the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (I.C.C.I.), which was also the Israel chapter of Religions

for Peace. (I will never forget how Alice spoke eloquently at our 10th anniversary celebration at the Rockefeller Foundation in New York City in 2001.) In my own work, I also discovered the power and potential of civil society organizations, especially since my organization once comprised 70+ such organizations throughout Israel, all of which were doing important things in the field of inter-religious and intercultural understanding and cooperation.

Another person whom Arnow wrote about positively is Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum, who is my rabbi in Jerusalem and was a student and protégé of Shalvi (who served as honorary president of Kehillat Tzion in Jerusalem until her death) in October 2023. In Elad-Applebaum's remarks to the author, she spoke poignantly about the role of prayer in her community:

"Prayer is the gateway to the soul, the airport for the soul. When we pray together, suddenly hope is substantial, tangible, and then more people come. They already know the world that separates people and says that there is no hope. People come to Tzion to dream together, to build a new kind of community. It's a labor of hope. Hope needs to be expressed in community. Deeds give it real presence."

During the six years since she said these words in her interview with Arnow, Rabbi Tamar has built a strong community, which offers spiritual sustenance to hundreds of followers and guests from all over Israel and the world. She has also developed very special interreligious commemorations – during Hanukkah and around Jerusalem Day – which inspire people from her community and beyond about the possibilities of living together in this land.

### The power of Jewish humor

In addition to his reflections on Israel, Arnow has a beautiful section in the book on the role of Jewish humor in keeping hope alive. Here, he refers to the late chief rabbi of the UK, Jonathan Sacks, who called humor "a first cousin to hope," and he adds that "for Jews, hope and humor may be even more

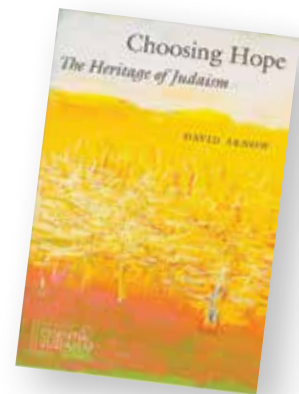
closely related." Arnow concludes this chapter with this thought:

"Humor does more than make us laugh. It keeps us going, keeps us human. Theologian Harvey Cox wrote about an 'irrepressible radical hope that remains alive and well in the comic... It could conceivably disappear, and where laughter and hope have disappeared, man has ceased to be man.'... The antidote to despair is laughter, unearthing the humorous not just in jokes, but wherever we can. When we do, we may experience a sense of hope that flows from an enhanced ability to imagine a world better than the one we're facing at that or any given moment, such as when life is not flowing."

### A call to action

Arnow concludes his book with his own concise theology of hope. As part of these concluding thoughts, he urges all of us to play a role in this: "When we share the narratives of the Jewish people and interpret them through the lens of hope, we spread hope."

Thank you, David Arnow, for this inspirational book. We all need it very much during this precarious moment in our history. ■



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