



## Optimism, Leadership and the Order of the Teaspoon

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A poll published in July in *The New York Times* found that close to 40% of young adults surveyed said they are choosing not to have children (or to have fewer) due to their fears about global instability. What a statistic of despair! Getting our daily overdose of grim news can cause one to wonder if bringing more human beings into the world – especially those that we will love and care about – might be a bad idea. Is it better to spare our un-conceived from a future fraught with stress and doom, or is bringing new life into the world the ultimate form of optimism?

When I send cards of *mazal tov* to new parents, I often end with the line “This could be the one!” One of the joys that is inherent in having a child is the idea that this “one” can make the world less bleak. Yes, I know, their cuteness (and the smell of the top of their head) already brighten the world, but what I mean by this is that this child could eventually grow into just the person who will end poverty, cure disease, solve climate change or bring peace. Who knows?

This type of optimism is woven into the fabric of the Jewish psyche. Some might see it as the messianic dream, others might refer to it as *tikkun olam*, but I call it Jewish leadership. In fact, optimism is a *sine qua non* of leadership. Optimism is not hope, whereby one wishes with all their might for a better day. No, unlike hope, optimism requires action. Optimism is the belief that tomorrow can be better than today and that I have a part in making that happen.

No optimism, no leadership. Imagine an authority figure, your rabbi, your board chair, your CEO saying to the community, “Well folks, today is as good as it gets. It’s all downhill from here!” Would you refer to that person as a leader? Rather we need leaders like Rebbe Nachman of Breslov who famously said to his Jewish community “*Lo tit'ya-esh – Assur l'hit'ya-esh* – Do NOT despair! It is forbidden to despair!” Tomorrow will be better than today and we can never give up on making sure that happens.

“But the issues facing the Jewish world, America and the earth are too big! There is nothing I can do that will really matter,” you might say. *Assur l'hit'ya-esh!* Do not

despair! Most leadership comes in the form of small acts rooted in optimism. Very few of us will part the Red Sea. But all of us have the chance to exercise leadership every day – in our organizations, classrooms, homes and communities. And it is easier to be optimistic if we are surrounded by other optimists. Part of leadership entails encouraging each other's action-based optimism.

We recently lost Amos Oz, a luminary of Israel and the Jewish world. He related this parable: If someone sees a huge calamity in the form of a burning fire, they have choices on how to react. One choice is to "bring a bucket of water and throw it on the fire, and if you don't have a bucket, bring a glass, and if you don't have a glass, use a teaspoon, everyone has a teaspoon. And yes, I know a teaspoon is little and the fire is huge, but there are millions of us and each one of us has a teaspoon."

Oz wanted to create the Order of the Teaspoon whose members don't have an attitude of despair, but who are optimistic, ready to act and have "the teaspoon attitude." (For a beautiful and slightly different take on Oz's view of hope and optimism, [read this](#) from his daughter Fania.)

Leadership is the skillful use of one's self to intervene in a group situation to affect positive change. Helen Keller supported this when she wrote that "optimism is the faith that leads to achievement." The Jewish world needs optimists because there is still so much that needs to be achieved.

Exercising leadership means having a robust imagination of what the future can be and then doing something to work toward it. Optimism is contagious, so don't keep it to yourself. Inspired leadership requires us to share our optimism with others. It could, in fact, result in a self-fulfilling prophecy of an amazing Jewish future. Of course, unbridled optimism can veer into naivete. While remaining optimistic, skillful leadership necessitates a keen sense of seeing things as they really are. If we can have a clear view of reality, then we can intervene more skillfully to bring about a better future.

And just like each new baby has the potential to be the "one" to affect positive change, as leaders we too can be the "one," the one in a group of many, each holding our teaspoon ready to act.

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