One of our founding members and past presidents, Jack Cohen, died this past April.

Jack was born on October 4, 1914 here in Brooklyn. And if he had made it to this Yom Kippur he would have celebrated his century mark. And what a century it has been.

Jack lived through an era that saw change and innovation unprecedented in human history. He lived through Women’s Suffrage, the War to End all Wars, the Great Depression, the Second World War the Holocaust, and the birth of the modern State of Israel.

He saw the USA add two states and stars to the Union, the conquest of polio and other scourges, and putting a man on the moon. He also lived to see the crumbling of the post World War II order, the rise of world-wide terrorism, the Great Recession and fall of the Twin Towers just across the river.

On Yom Kippur we will read “One generation comes into the world to be blessed with days of peace and safety: another goes through the valley of shadow enduring the cruelty of persecution and war.”

In Jack’s almost century of life he experienced [both] ‘peace & safety’ as well as ‘war & persecution,’ and more than once.

Tonight, conscious of Jack’s physical absence for the first time in the history of our synagogue,

© Rabbi Serge A. Lippe – Erev Rosh HaShanah 5775 - 2014
I wonder aloud, which period are we now experiencing?

The world is not quite broken,
but for me,
it feels as if it has lost at least some of its previous equilibrium.
Too many of the mechanisms of progress, peace and stability feel fractured.
Too many of us,
myself most certainly included,
feel a sense of frustration or creeping despair.

Jack’s death this past Spring
coincided with the beginning of an unsettled period in world affairs: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,
military take-overs in Thailand and Egypt,
the continuing carnage of innocents in Syria,
the collapse of US led peace efforts between Israel & the Palestinians, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,
the still unsolved kidnapping
of more than 200 Nigerian school girls by Boko Haram,
the murder of innocent Israeli and Palestinian teenagers,
the ensuing missile and ground war in Israel and Gaza,
the continued resurgence of ancient tribal and religious hatreds, especially of Anti-Semitism in continental Europe,
the raw powder keg
revealed by the deaths of unarmed African-Americans
at the hands of the police in New York and Missouri,
America’s continuing obsession with guns
highlighted by an eight year-old girl now scarred for life
having killed her Uzi submachine gun instructor,
the beheadings of American and European journalists and aid workers, a virulent and deadly strain of the Ebola virus
that World Health authorities were unprepared for,
and which shows no sign of being contained.

And around the world
we see military force
as an increasing first resort
and declining interest
or even value
in diplomatic efforts to resolve disputes.
How can we NOT feel frustration at the course of human affairs?
How can we NOT feel a little bit of despair creeping up at our doorstep?
There are many who would still affirm
that history moves inevitably in a straight
or at least average line of progress.

The prophetic Jewish tradition affirms that one day,
all the world shall be one and at peace.

Progressive Judaism in its very name
affirms the idea of social and historical progress.

As a child, I was raised with the belief that
what Dr. King called the ‘arc of the moral universe’, however long, bends
inexorably toward justice.

Any yet at this moment, in this season,
it is difficult to stand unwaveringly by those affirmations.

Progress is not a certainty.
There is no assured guarantee
of the ultimate improvement of the human condition.

Technology may follow Moore’s Law,
but the fulfillment of our various utopian visions
now vie with cinematically crafted dystopian forebodings.

Hope in the future is—at least—a little bit harder these days.

The world may not exactly be falling apart,
but it DOES feel as if it’s at least fraying around the edges.

President Obama tried to contextualize recent events
reminding us that history has always been a messy affair.
But somehow events these days feel more than simply messy.
At times they feel almost gruesome.
"Many perceive a world out of control and driven by malign forces".

So at the beginning of this New Year I have found myself struggling . . .
Struggling . . .
With a world in which the immediate future looks less safe and secure.
With a world in which some nations
no longer comport themselves by the agreements and understandings that were
fashioned out of the crucible of the last world war.
A world in which the Jewish People
    is no longer entirely united and unified in their attitudes and feelings
    for our Jewish homeland Israel.
A world in which ancient hatreds, most especially anti-Semitism
    look resurgent, viral and deadly.
A world in which vengeance, not progress,
    too often seems to be the guiding force.
A world in which armed conflict and acts of terrorism
    are not merely more likely, but ever increasing.
A world in which security concerns
    have trumped our commitments to liberty and freedom.
A world in which access to the basic standards of living
    are contracting rather than expanding.
A world of increasing tribalism and claims exclusive truth & right
A world that seems to be regressing rather than progressing.
A world that looks to be less hospitabile
    to my children and grandchildren.
A world that is not been a reassuring place.

These days the news, or what passes for it—
mostly “murder & mayhem”—
is almost consistently depressing.
It’s enough to make you want to turn away
    and ignore the world around you.

Standing here in front of the congregation on this evening,
it’s tremendously tempting to avoid, or deny or at least ignore the miasma
    of disillusionment
    that has grown up over the last months.

And how dare any spiritual leader
    talk about Justice and argue for a Divine Presence
when in the world about us—almost on an hourly basis—
    what our world evinces is not Order but Chaos.
How dare we claim meaningfulness and goodness in this world
when the television and tablet screens
provide live color feeds of brazen indifference
and radical human evil.

It is so very tempting to despair, to give in, to abandon hope,
to pronounce all our efforts vanity -futile,
to declare even the possibility of the Divine
to be impotent or indifferent.
It is all too easy to throw up our own hands,
declare matters beyond our abilities,
to surrender into the comforting ease of cynicism and despair. Why affirm
what is not evident?
Why insist on what appears improbable, if not impossible?

Fatalism and hedonism are not all that far removed.
In both philosophies we reject concern for the outside world.
On a night such as this,
it is tempting to retreat into the rituals and memories
that block out the larger world around us,
seeking an excuse, a justification
for avoidance, apathy or denial.

We live in an age where we are more aware of information,
specific reliable information,
than ever before in history.
And the price of all this information is knowledge,
and knowledge can be both a gift and a burden.
The airwaves and magazine pages
are filled with narratives and images
that can make the most hopeful heart pause and shudder.

Despair crouches at the door, lurking, always waiting.

But to be a Jew has always been to battle such despair.
To live and persevere through such times;
age of tumult and worry,
periods of fear and suffering,
eras of persecution and death.
As the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote:
“hope needs to be
like barbed wire to keep out despair,
hope must be a mine field.”

In my own riff on Amichai,
hope is the armor that we Jews wear.

To live as Jews has meant sustaining hope,
hope in a vision greater than
mere periods of relative peace and security,
has meant affirming the promise of the prophet’s vision
of a day of peace, progress and prosperity
greater and longer lasting than those we have known.

“[The founding] generations of Reform Jews
had unbound confidence in humanity’s potential for good.”

But following the terrible tragedy of the Holocaust
we were compelled to reassert
our tradition’s realism about the [endless] human capacity for evil.

Yet [even so,] our people has always refused to despair.

The survivors of the Holocaust, being granted life,
seized it, nurtured it, and, rising above catastrophe,
showed humankind that the human spirit is indomitable.

The State of Israel, established and maintained by the Jewish will to live,
demonstrates [at its very best]
what a united people can accomplish in history.

The [very] existence of the Jew is an argument against despair;
Jewish survival is warrant for human hope.
We remain God's witness that history [need not be] meaningless.
We affirm that … [we] are not powerless to affect [our] destiny.”

In our gathering each year to mark the New Year,
we rededicate ourselves,
as did previous generations of Jews,
to affirm our hope and to work for that day
when the prophet's vision will be realized:
that one day,
all humanity will live as one and at peace with one another.
This vision of the prophet may not be destiny,
there are no guarantees,
but it is a vision that can be achieved - if we will work for it.
If we refuse to yield to despair,
if we will affirm hope.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Arik Ascherman recently asked,
given the current mess of world circumstances –
is hope even defensible?
Are we rabbis just putting on our seasonal rose-colored glasses?

“there are objective reasons and historical precedents
that [argue in favor of] hope.
Without the ability to see beyond the current reality
and truly believe in the possibility
that a different and better reality was in the offing,
the Jewish people would have disappeared . . . 2000 years ago.”
Rosh Hashana
which “Recall[s] the creation of the world,
reconnects us with the vision of the world as God intended,
and to which we aspire.”

No vision can be achieved by hope alone,
but a vision will not sprout into deeds
if hope dies under the weight of despair.
“There is evil enough to break the heart,
good enough to exalt the soul.” - we read in the prayerbook.
Yes, there is evil enough in the world to break the heart,
to cause the soul to despair,
to drown our hope.

So while hope is the antidote to despair,
it is also choice that must be made.
Hope must be embraced.
It must be internalized.
It must be imbibed. It must be our sustenance.
If our provisions are hope we will prevail over despair.
As we read on Yom Kippur
“Hope is meat and drink to us; hope sustains us.”
Hope is at our table.
HOPE IS LOCAL.
Hope doesn’t start out ‘there’.
Certainly not in the news or the internet.
Hope isn’t reported on, for the most part.

Hope happens in your home,
sometimes at school or work.

And hope happens in our community and in our neighborhood,
and especially here in our synagogue
(You know I don’t mean the physical building).

Hope is all the newborns
that we will see and hear in this Sanctuary tomorrow.

Hope is the religious school children frolicking through the building
and joining the Torah procession.

Hope is the beaming faces of the newly affianced,
the new brides and new grooms.
And the expectant and recent parents and grandparents.

Hope is members and friends who have recuperated from illness
or found new employ.

Hope is new members
and the members of long standing
who CHOOSE, EVERY YEAR to stay and participate.

Hope is the community of those who gather to worship
or just see one another and chill out on Friday evening
in our Sanctuary.

Hope is the gathering of those who choose to engage
with the Torah portion each week in our Library.
Hope is the committees and groups,  
from BHGSY to the Book Group  
that see the synagogue as their home.

Hope is those who sign up to learn a 4,000 year old language  
and those who decide to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah  
long after their 13th birthday.

Hope is those who attend  
our courses, programs and films about Israel  
and agree to politely disagree  
because loving and carrying for one another is more important.

Hope is our synagogue’s commitment to 10 human beings  
to be fed, sheltered and treated as our guests every season.

Hope is a when we show up to shiva and make minyan.

Hope is our commitment to remembering those who have died  
but whose legacies still endure here.

HOPE IS LOCAL. And Hope is here.

Hope is personal, inspirational.  
Take a moment a look for someone here who inspires you  
and give them a thanks, a wink or a smile. (REALLY!)

Hope for me is Jack Cohen  
and his generation  
and their refusal to give in to despair,  
their willingness to enlist and fight for a better world,  
their commitment to continue hoping in the face of adversity.

Hope for me is embodied and personified  
in a neighbor and a Jew 50 years my senior,  
still present even in his absence,  
who as a century tossed peace and adversity about in equal measures,  
recognized the value of creating a home for his family and community.

In his first President’s letter in the BHS Bulletin of September 1970 Jack wrote:
"We must not only do good deeds ourselves, we must also interest others in good works. . . . There is a place . . . where you can make a positive contribution. Share some of your talents and abilities with us. . . . In order to continue our PROGRESS, [we] need the assistance of . . . every member. I know I can count on you."

Yes Jack, you can still count on us! Even now when the going feels a little bit tougher and rougher.

As we enter this New Year, let us embrace a hope both in the prophet’s vision of progress and Jack Cohen’s more local and immediate commitment to it.

Though the larger world around us may cycle through adversity and discord, at this Rosh Hashanah, as we recall the creation of the world, once again reconnecting with God’s vision for the world to which we still aspire, let us also recall Jack Cohen’s century and centuries before of Jewish women and men who lived lives that even in the most difficult of times affirmed their hopes and aspirations.

May we be inscribed for a year filled with hope and blessings! Keyn yehi ratzon! L’shana Tova!