

## Interview

# Rabbi Moshe Berger



*When hope is not just feeling, not just wishful thinking, then what is it? Confronted with harsh realities, a Rabbi answers.*

*Moshe Berger is currently the Rabbi at Temple Beth El of Patchogue, New York. He also serves as the Cantor and is a Certified Mohel. He was born in Jerusalem, coming from a family of Rabbis, Cantors, Scholars, and Sofrim (Scribes).*

*He is very active in the newly-formed Suffolk County Bias Task Force and the Ecumenical organization that meets regularly in his community.*

*With a background in psychology, Rabbi Berger has worked as a counselor in the treatment of alcoholics and drug addicts and has been involved in many outreach programs. He is in the process of writing a Judaic-oriented daily Prayer and Meditation handbook for individuals in Twelve-Step programs.*

**S**habbat Shalom: Rabbi Berger, we have seen in the past few years the publication of a large number of books and articles on the subject of hope. How do you explain the recent interest in this subject?

**Berger:** I believe that we write about hope and that there are so many publications written about hope because there is much hope to write about; for example, the peace process that has been tak-

ing place to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite efforts to sabotage the peace process by terrorism, there is a lot of hope that there will be peace in the Middle East. The fall of the USSR and communism is a kind of sign that people are sick of oppression; they don't want it anymore; they want freedom; and it is another sign of hope. I believe there is a lot more sensitivity and understanding between the Jewish and Christian communities, and certainly the Vatican's new relationship with Israel has helped to promote that understanding between the Jewish and Christian communities. There are many things that are taking place in our world today which give us hope; and when there is hope, you write about it.

**Shabbat Shalom:** You see many reasons for writing about hope in the events that have taken place in the political as well as the national scene.

**Berger:** Absolutely, but not just there. There is a reason for hope especially here in the United States and especially here in New York with which I am familiar. People are ashamed of many things that are taking place. Shame is not spoken about much in society anymore; it used to be a taboo word. Psychologists will say how bad shame is for the personality and for growth, and the concept of guilt is not a good thing to have; but I think people are ashamed of the things that are happening here in New York, and that in itself gives hope to a people because obviously they want to do something about it.

**Shabbat Shalom:** You mention shame and desire for change as reasons for and possible components of hope. In your opinion, are there other elements that make up hope? Please analyze hope: what are the different feel-

ings of hope? What are the circumstantial as well as the emotional components of hope?

**Berger:** Well, hope is primarily a feeling; it is something that has to come from within. It is about looking at things posi-

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tively, optimistically, hoping for the best, looking at the glass as half full as opposed to seeing it being half empty. And yet, what I mean by internal is that I can't hope for world peace unless there is something in me that has hope for me as an individual, as a human being. The hope has to begin inside me; and if I have that hope inside me, then obviously that will be conveyed for the hopes and aspirations for everyone, so it has to begin within. There is also a part of hope that implies that all is not well. There are troubles and problems on a personal level because if there weren't, then what would I have to hope for? There have to be perspectives internally. The same thing applies to the world; we know the negatives, the problems, and the difficulties in the world, and that in itself often creates the hope, the desire for change. People either choose to stay in the problem and stay in the difficulty and submit to the pain, or they hope for something better than what they have at the present time.

**Shabbat Shalom:** To reword your twofold answer, first, in order to have hope, you need to be in a situation where change is desirable so that you can have something to hope for beyond

the present situation. And second, hope starts with me, and I need to hope myself in order to have hope on a bigger scale.

**Berger:** Yes, but the other part is this internal part; for example, a child who is raised in a very hopeful family does not have to be confronted with problems to realize that there is a certain hope about things, because he has been taught that.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Would you equate a hopeful outlook with having a positive outlook?

**Berger:** Correct. The two are almost synonymous. In other words, we are always looking to the future positively, optimistically. We always hope for the best things in life. So you can be raised with hope, and eventually when the difficulties occur, you realize that there is that hope because you have been trained that way. Often we are not raised in a very hopeful environment. I have seen that very often in individuals who have a totally pessimistic and negative view of life, and sometimes you have to instill the hope in them and show them that they can get better; they can improve, and there is something to hope for.

**Shabbat Shalom:** You mentioned that hope is something that can be passed on by your family. Why is hope so important to Jewish people? Is this something that Jews cultivate more than others?

**Berger:** I don't think so. I think hope is important for Jews as it is for other people. Our hope is no more and no less than others'. If we speak as the Jewish people as a minority, we too want freedom from hatred and intolerance and would like to see a dissolution of anti-Semitism. If there is one difference in what we

may hope for, and I think there is, I think that the Jewish people have a unique hope. I think our hope, one of them anyway, has been to be left alone, not to be singled out for persecution, exile, annihilation or proselytization. Our history down to the present day is marked by all of these going back to ancient times. The Arab world denies our right to even exist. Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam would prefer our nonexistence. The neo-Nazis, skinheads, and Holocaust revisionists continue to plague us. Islamic and Arab terrorists would like to see us dead. We are the chosen people in many negative ways, and for this reason when an individual converts to Judaism, not only is a person discouraged before and during the process, but also the Talmud states that we should ask him, "What reason do

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you have for desiring to become a proselyte? Do you know that Israel at the present time is oppressed, despised, harassed, and overcome by afflictions?" This is the reality with which the convert is confronted. Let me clarify: by wanting to be left alone I don't mean that we long for isolation, but rather we hope that others will not isolate us as targets, as victims. In that aspect I think that the Jewish people do have a unique hope that goes way back. The other things that we hope for are the same as other people's.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Because of the fact that Jews have been negatively singularized more

than other people, there is a dimension of hope or a continuity of hope in history that is specifically Jewish?

**Berger:** Yes, it is an acceptance of a reality, and that despite the reality, there is always hope. The fact that we are still here and still practicing our faith is a sign that there must be hope. There have been so many efforts, not only to destroy us as a people, but to destroy us spiritually and to abolish the Jewish faith in history. The fact that we have survived not just as a people but as a holy nation is a sign that there is hope to go on and on. Biblically, of course, with the endless times that the Israelites sinned and still God forgave us, God obviously gave us that kind of hope, the hope that God would always be with us. The epitome of the Jewish sin was the golden calf, but even after that, God still fulfills His promise. The fact that no matter what you do, God is still going to love you, is hope enough, and that has carried us through the ages. The hope comes from God; and as time went on, it came from each other sticking together and practicing the faith. That in itself has kept us together because nothing else has been able to keep us together.

**Shabbat Shalom:** The hope that you have referred to is a hope the object of which is life and survival as a people. Would you define this as being the main thrust of the hope that Jews have carried in themselves and have also given the world through their writings, or is there something beyond or beside?

**Berger:** Our hope is still to be able to practice our faith in freedom, hoping for the Messiah to come. The other part of the hope is that we were destined to be a light unto the other nations, a nation of God, and that the

world would follow those teachings in that respect; and we still have that hope. That is something that I can't say every Jew

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has, but people that are dedicated to Judaism hope for that.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Despite Christianity's many failures and sins against the Jews, Christianity is also a religion of hope. In your opinion what are the differences or similarities between the Jewish hope and the Christian hope?

**Berger:** I'm going to answer you very briefly: there is no difference. Hope is hope. The only difference is in what we may hope for, the object of hope, and that is where the only difference might be. Obviously there are many similarities, and each faith has its own particular hope. We hope for the Messiah to come. On the other hand, in Christianity the Messiah has already come, and Christians are looking forward to the world to come. Hope in that respect is no different. Like other feelings and aspirations, hope is very subjective and individual, and each religion has its own particular feelings of hope, but otherwise a feeling is a feeling.

**Shabbat Shalom:** And that is the point of contact between all human beings including those of the Jewish faith and the Christian faith. As far as the object, though, did you have anything specific in mind as to how Chris-

tian and Jewish hopes might differ or be the same?

**Berger:** I believe the Christian and Jewish communities hope for that which the entire world hopes for: to live peacefully with love, understanding, and respect. We would like to see an end to war and terrorism; the demise of poverty, homelessness, illness, and physical, sexual, and child abuse; and a drug-free world. We would like to see a world governed by justice, mercy, and equality for all. These are basic and not just religious aspirations. They are human aspirations and hopes.

*Shabbat Shalom:* Do they have to do with the improvement of this world?

**Berger:** Well, the improvement of the world has to do, I guess, with each faith, what each religion can offer to accomplish that end. Just to add to your previous statement regarding Christianity's weaknesses, all faiths have their own weaknesses, and usually we are our own worst

**Berger:** Well, there is obviously a connection; but I think faith is more intense, more vital than hope. One may have hope without having faith, but faith implies hope. I may hope that I will remain healthy or that tragedy will not strike my family, but if, God forbid, it should strike, then my hopes have been shattered, but not my faith. My faith assures me that regardless of what befalls me God will always be with me. It is easy to have faith when things are going well, when they are going our way. Like so many other attributes, faith has to be tested and ground through the grist-mill in order to gauge its depth; so there is a difference between hope and faith.

*Shabbat Shalom:* Are you defining hope, as opposed to faith, as a kind of a secular faith, a faith that every human being has naturally; and faith as being something that is more religious and based on God?

**Berger:** Absolutely, one does

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enemy. Within Judaism, we can sabotage or do more damage to ourselves than anyone else has ever done, and I believe that applies to Christianity as well. Sometimes internal struggles and conflicts can be more damaging than conflicts that come from the outside world.

*Shabbat Shalom:* What is the connection between hope and faith?

not have to believe in God in order to have hope. Hope, as I said before, is simply a positive state of mind when you look at things optimistically. There are many atheists and agnostics who not only have hope but also observe moral and ethical values without religious influence, and very often do so to a greater extent than those who believe in God. If you want to call them people who are spiritually oriented, it does not

necessarily mean that they have faith. Should their hopes be shattered, then what would they do? That is why I feel that you must have faith whether it is in God, a supreme being, or some other power or source other than yourself.

*Shabbat Shalom:* So faith is something more religious than hope; and if the basis of hope

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is not God or a supreme being or something, then what is the basis of hope? Is it possible to hope without a religious dimension, without God?

**Berger:** Absolutely.

*Shabbat Shalom:* What is the basis of hope? On what ground should a pessimistic person, seeing what the world is like and what it has been, turn around and decide to begin having hope?

**Berger:** For a person to have hope it does not necessitate having a religious affiliation or even a belief in God. There is no requisite other than the fact that you have hope simply by having hope. In other words, you have that kind of personality inside you, or something has happened in your life and because of that you have a different outlook, and you become a whole new person, or you don't have hope at all. It does not mean that faith and religion cannot come to an individual and say: we re-

alize that you have no hope, but we can give you hope; we can instill that in you. Hope is a state of mind, it has nothing to do with the end result. It has nothing to do with what is going to happen. Somebody hopes they will get this job, but whether they get the job or not has nothing to do with it. If they don't get the job, they can still remain hopeful for other things, or they may be very depressed, feel rejected, inadequate and so on. Part of that faith is hope—I'm hoping to get that job, but if and when I don't get the job, faith says it's all right, I know God.

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In case I can't support myself, God will take care of me. Once the aim of hope has or has not been achieved, then faith takes over and says it's all right, God will take care of me even though the hope has not been fulfilled.

**Shabbat Shalom:** And that is a dimension that the nonreligious person cannot experience.

**Berger:** No, all they can do is hope for the next situation. But the fact that the hope has not come through—using the previous example with the unemployed person who now finds himself destitute, he does not have a job and has to provide for his family—if life keeps going on, hope can really take a beating; but if there is faith, the person knows that God will take care of him. That is the dimension that lives in faith. Faith means that there is something outside of yourself. Yes, you can have faith in yourself, but in certain crises that is a very poor thing to fall back on. In faith there is something outside of yourself that you know is with

you and regardless of how things turn out, faith will always be there.

**Shabbat Shalom:** You mentioned earlier that something could happen to a person to turn him or her into a hopeful person. Now there may be some things that are so tragic that they kill hope. Do you think that one can still hope after Auschwitz?

**Berger:** We can have hope that Auschwitz will never happen again. We can have that hope. The reality in history tells us that it can happen again. We have witnessed the atrocities that have happened in Bosnia. Yes, we should have hope, and I think we do have hope in spite of the events of the Holocaust; but we also should not be naive. There is a Jewish saying that it is good to hope but bad to depend on it. Another Yiddish saying is that hoping and waiting turn wise men into fools. Hope is a good thing; but when events turn against us, faith and action are required. I must do my part. This is why—I think in terms of the Holocaust and Auschwitz—I have to be able to act. I have to hope that my actions will make a difference, and that my protest will be heard; and even if they are not heard, I will still have protested. Hope can only go so far.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Auschwitz is an event that has impacted humanity and especially the Jews at the national and collective level. I was wondering if there is a special individual experience that has had a distinctive impact in your personal understanding of hope.

**Berger:** As a Rabbi, there are many opportunities where I can witness in other people hope taking place, or the person acquir-

ing hope. I have also worked in the field of alcoholism and drug addiction in counseling and outreach programs, and I have seen people come into treatment or counseling with no hope; they have no God, and the only hope that is given to them is usually by other recovering people. The other recovering people tell them there is hope for you because: "Look at what has happened to me; I was able to get over my addiction and to be a decent human being again." Many of these people in the process of recovery still have trouble with a belief in God. Their hope is outside themselves coming from someone who can give them hope because it has worked for them. I have seen it over and over again. Whatever your unique problem is, the only person who can help you outside of God is another person who has gone through a similar experience and tells you, This is how I was able to get through that without destroying myself, without destroying people around me. That is why I said hope does not necessitate God. It helps if you do have God; and most people in recovery (I speak more now about the Twelve-Step programs dealing with alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders, gambling) do come to that point where they believe in a higher

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power. For most people, that higher power is God, and now faith enters the picture. The people are given hope, and now they know that God is working in their lives. They have never experienced that kind of sensation before, a loving God taking care of them. It's good to see a

sermon instead of hearing it.

**Shabbat Shalom:** There are some moments in a conversation when you feel a window is opened before you. That has just happened to me when you mentioned that many a time hope comes to people through other people's hope. Do you have something personal that you would like to share on this that would give me an idea of what place you give hope in your life?

**Berger:** Well, looking back in my life, in terms of maybe one of the most devastating events, which was physical illness, I had an undiagnosed ruptured appendix for two days; and literally, without being melodramatic, I was at death's door. They could not diagnose it due to other complications. If they had waited another hour or two, I never would have made it; and naturally everybody in my family was praying to God that I would come through the surgery, and everything would be all right. My mother ran to the Rabbi to have him give me another name, which was Haim, meaning "life." Legally speaking, my name is Haim Moshe Berger. As opposed to friendship, it was my family who gave me hope during that time. I was very sick for about three or four weeks in intensive care. I was at a point in my life when I was very young. Sometimes young people don't automatically think of God so readily in terms of "God is going to help me." It seems that people around you are there for you, to give you hope, and you need that sometimes more than you need God—to have a physical presence, to know that you are not alone. It is very hard sometimes to rely on your faith when everything looks dark, and it is very hard to see things.

**Shabbat Shalom:** It is a blessing to have people around you that would be able to provide some of this hope. Some perhaps may not have people around them, but may have a Bible. What is according to you the biblical text which contains the most powerful lesson of hope?

**Berger:** There are so many. I think of something that is very universal, a quotation from Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." By the way, most of the world is ignorant of the fact that this text is Judaic in origin and mistakenly credits Jesus and Christianity for it. No other nation has had to turn the other cheek more than we have. When asked if he could briefly summarize the teachings of the entire Torah and how he could do that, one of our sages responded with the text: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself, and all the rest is just commentary and explanation." So our Torah is about love; and our hope is that mankind, including Judaism (the Jewish people), may practice the golden rule which God gave to the world. That biblical text says so much about what would make this world all right. If there was somebody sick and there was no cure, they would not be going through it alone; there would be somebody there with them. There would not be any war. There would not be any terrorism, crime, poverty, or homelessness because we would be loving so much ourselves. Why should we treat ourselves that way?

**Shabbat Shalom:** Do you have a last word on hope?

**Berger:** Well, I certainly hope that the readers will benefit from this interview. I believe that hope as well as faith have one thing in common—they are not enough

by themselves. We all have to act on both, and it has to begin with me first. I have to act on both because to sit back on an easy chair and say, "I hope for this," is nice, and to say to myself, "Well, let all the problems go on, and I'll have faith that God will take care of them," is fine; but it is not going to accomplish very much. We may hope for understanding, but it helps to invite people together to discuss how to attain it. We may hope for peace and tranquillity; but it is more important to promote it, support it, and to protest when we see evil, to cry out against terrorism, and to demand justice when we witness a child being abused. Faith without works is useless. We have to be there for other people. Feelings and actions are two separate things. We may feel a certain way, but we need to act

### *Faith without works is useless.*

on the wonderful feelings; and I feel it begins on a personal level. If I can do it, maybe others will follow my example. And that it is important in the role of leaders in every community, not just in religious communities—Jewish, Christian, Islamic. The leaders in government have to lead by example and to be role models whom we see act in the things that we hope for, and we have faith that they will come true. When a government does not act on it, then people give up on it.

**Shabbat Shalom:** When we see and act on what we hope, then there will be hope again. Rabbi Berger, thank you very much for your answers.

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This interview was conducted by Samuel Garbi, Senior Pastor of the Patchogue and Riverhead Seventh-day Adventist Churches in Suffolk County, Long Island, New York.