

Might Things Get Better?

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

There are times it appears that to be successful one needs to be a harbinger of catastrophe. Optimism is the besetting sin; we like our Jeremiahs, our Cassandras, and we are forever opening Pandora's box.

But you need not be rosy eyed or naïve to doubt the certainty of decline. "On what principle is it, that when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?" asked Macaulay two centuries ago. In many ways, things have gotten far better since his time. Obviously the Jewish people have suffered terribly, and many other peoples have endured horrific fates, but the average westerner lives a better life than the wildest dream of any ancient King. Life expectancy climbs. Living with antibiotics, modern dentistry and indoor plumbing already vaults you across the beleaguered centuries.

Mill had it right when he wrote: "I have observed that not the man who hopes when others despair, but the man who despairs when others hope, is admired by a large class of persons at large." We Jews are a long lived people. We've seen awful and we fear worse. But Nahman of Bratzlav taught that despair is a sin. Hope is a virtue. And (shhh) things just might keep getting better.