Candles of Hope

Mikketz

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I recently recommended *The Anatomy of Hope* to a member of KBI. Written by a hematologist-oncologist, who teaches at Harvard medical School, the author has seen many deaths and many miracles. Jerome Groopman, a committed Conservative Jew, writes about the quest of individuals seeking hope amid the trials and fears of illness. He writes about how he came to see the vital role hope plays in medical care.

With appreciation for spirituality and science, Groopman offers a survey of research into how expectations affect our ability to overcome injury and illness. He emphasizes the difference between true hope and false hope. What aids us to emerge from crises is acknowledgement of both best- and worst-case scenarios. Hope acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along that path. True hope has no room for delusion.

Our Sages also taught that we should not depend on miracles. I tell people facing serious illness that the effort to recover and manage their disease is analogous to a pole vaulter who must reach 17 feet, 6 inches to get over the bar. 17 feet will come from the physiology of the body and the medical treatment. 6 inches depends on a will to live, support of family and strong faith. One without the other is insufficient.

We have just concluded our celebrations of Hanukkah. Let me add a naturalist perspective to the military and miracle narrative.
Our Rabbis taught: When Adam saw the day getting gradually shorter, he said, *'Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returning to its state of chaos and confusion; this then is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven! 'So he began keeping an eight days 'fast. But as he observed*

the winter solstice and noted the day getting increasingly longer, he said, 'This is the world's course ~ עולם כמנהגו נוהג, and he set forth to keep an eight days festivity. In the following year he appointed both as festivals. (Avodah Zara 8a)

This is the world's course ~ עולם כמנהגו נוהג. This midrash is not only about Hanukkah and the winter solstice. It is about our lives every day. There is no mention of the Maccabees here, no mention of military victory or miracle of oil. But this narrative about Adam after the expulsion from Eden does offer a valuable theological and historical perspective.

After the destruction of the First Temple, Jewish life was darkening. After the return from Exile, after the construction of a modest Temple in Jerusalem, our people experienced the abandonment of Judaism for the dominant Hellenistic culture, at the darkest time — the winter of our communal despair – a light of hope was kindled through the events of Hanukkah.

Hope plays an important role in the Torah narrative about Yakov. Shown the torn and bloody garment of his son, Yakov tears his own clothing and mourns, but then we are told וַיְמָאֵן לְהִתְנַחֵם, he refused to be comforted. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: "To refuse to be comforted is to refuse to give up hope." We see this refusal to be comforted in the hopes of the families of those taken captive. And we hope that they will be reunited with their families, as Yakov was eventually reunited with Yosef.

Tragically, yesterday three of the kidnapped men were erroniously killed by the soldiers who were sent to save them. Not all hopes are realized.

Rabbi Sacks notes: "The evidence [of Jewish history] may signify irretrievable loss, [but] Jews never believed the evidence because they had something else to set against it – a faith, a trust, an unbreakable hope that proved stronger than historical inevitability. It is not too much to say

that Jewish survival was sustained in that hope. And that hope came from a simple – or perhaps not so simple – phrase in the life of Jacob. He refused to be comforted."

The saga of Jewish history has many recurring themes: exile and redemption, wandering and settlement, lapses and forgiveness, returns and re-dedications. Rabbi Sacks comments:

There is no "historical inevitability"… The deepest difference between linear and covenantal time is that whereas the first gives rise to optimism, the later leads to hope.

These two concepts, often confused, are in fact utterly different. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the belief that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage – only a certain naivety – to be an optimist. It takes great courage to sustain hope. No Jew – knowing what we do of the past, of hatred, bloodshed, persecution in the name of God, suppression of human rights in the name of freedom – can be an optimist. But Jews have never given up hope.

Let me tell you what gives me hope at this time.

Recently I met for a roundtable discussion at the US Embassy with Special Envoy Deborah Lyons of Canada and Deborah Lipstadt of the United States. They spoke about the high priority that the two governments are giving to combatting antisemitism and the importance of seeing fighting the conspiracy theory of antisemitism as part of a larger effort to destabilize liberal democracies. I am heartened to see so many governments working together with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance on behalf of the Jewish people and western democracy.

I am excited by the added commitment of young people to wear Jewish symbols, by the efforts of Vicky Ferkin to make bracelets to raise funds for Magen David Adam, by those who have baked hallot, those who have made special donations to the Jewish Federation of Ottawa for Israel, and by the determination of so many of you to show up for expressions of Jewish solidarity and support for Israel.

I am encouraged by the resilience of Israelis who are determined to help the country to recover from the Shmini Atzeret massacres: the soldiers fighting so fiercely in Gaza and at the northern border of the country, the volunteers who care for the hayyalim and those who harvest crops to sustain the agricultural sector, those who have opened their home sto those who have been displaced by the war.

I gained hope by knowing that the survivors of the Tree of Life killings in Pittsburgh and the families of those held hostages came together with the Governor of Pennsylvania to express spiritual strength for renewal and to light Hannukah candles in the governor's home (which has a mezuzah at the entrance).

Jewish students and faculty who fight back against campus antisemitism and call out university presidents and administrators who would describe calls for genocide to be contextual — give me hope.

I have been inspired by the number of non-Jews who have approved me about conversion to Judaism. "I want to be part of the Jewish people." This gives me hope.

This past week, as Hanukkah candles were kindled around the world some special *hanukkiyot* gave me hope. The mayor of New York City lit candles using a *hanukiyyah* crafted from materials reclaimed from the Israeli music festival where over 360 were murdered by Hamas terrorists.

It was “a symbol of light, unity, and the perseverance of the Jewish people.”

On the first night, Tamir Hershkovitz kindled his family’s menorah in the ruins of his childhood home in Kibbutz Be’eri. His parents and grandmother were killed in the massacre. The menorah belonged to his late grandfather, Yosef, a Holocaust survivor and partisan during World War II. Tamir sang to bring some joy back to his Kibbutz.

Shai Hermesh spent 20 hours in a safe room on Kfar Azah with his wife and daughter; their son Omer, was murdered during the attack. When Hermesh returned to the rubble of his home, he found his tefillin and a *hanukkiya*. At the Hanukkah party at the White House, President Joe Biden showcased that *hanukkiyah*: “Like the ancient Hanukkah story, buried [in] piles of shattered glass, burned debris, and bullet-riddled walls, he pulled something from the ashes fully intact: a menorah… a symbol of the Jewish people that not only survive but heal, rebuild and continue to shine their light on the world.”

Just prior to Hanukkah, an Israeli photographer, captured the image of a man lifting the remains of a *hanukkiyah* from the ruins of a home on Kibbutz Beeri. Two members of the of the Avigdori-Shoham-Kipnis family were murdered that horrible day; seven were taken hostage; six were finally released. “…The man cradles this symbol of his family’s past… even in the depths of despair, the indestructible light of hope, tradition, and resilience flickers on. …we see a reflection of our own ability to find strength and light, even when surrounded by the ashes of destruction.”

Rabbi Sacks, again:
“Religious faith is not “positive thinking.” It is not naïve optimism. It is not a matter of seeing the world as we would like it to be, and then believing

that mere wishing or praying will make it so. God never promised that the world would get better of its own accord. “

For there to be light, we must kindle a candle. For there to be hope, we must step forward and refuse to be comforted.

We stand up for the hostages and Israel because we refuse to be comforted. We stand against antisemitism in universities because we refuse to be comforted. We make our presence known on the streets of Ottawa because we refuse to be comforted. We make our position known to national and local media because we refuse to be comforted. In all of this, we must gain strength from our history and culture, our Torah and its moral outlook.

“Faith means seeing the world exactly as it is and yet not giving up the belief that it could be otherwise, if we are ready to act with others to make it so. Faith is realism that has been touched by hope.” *(Rabbi Sacks)*

The hard work of true hope has the power to heal our lives and heal the world.

https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/22/books/chapters/the-anatomy-of-hope.html

https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/optimism-is-all-very-well-but-it-takes-courage-to-hope/

This is an expanded version of the *derashah*/ sermon of by Rav Baruch at KBI on Shabbat Mikketz, Saturday, December 16.