

YK 5785 - LOSS AND FOUND

A story about an ultra orthodox rabbi - from that first excruciating post-October 7 week - who was part of those who were preparing bodies for dignified burial. Every waking hour back then was spent collecting body parts, unrecognizable limbs, pulverized skulls, a tooth over there, some drops of blood over here. Each afternoon a bunch of them were getting together for a brief Mincha service. Our friend noticed that the ultra-orthodox rav wasn't joining them. By the 4th day, he respectfully approached him to ask: Why aren't you joining us for the afternoon Service? He expected him to say something about how their prayer approach was uncomfortable for him. Instead he looked at our friend, then stared down at the ground, and then quietly said: "God and I aren't so good right now."

This, from an ultra-orthodox Rabbi. His faith in God would be restored, but not without heart-wrenching scrutiny and hard work. He, like the rest of us struggling through this agonizing year, had to eventually find, through his pain, a path back to our people's traditions.

Shortly, we'll arrive at Yizkor when we feel the fragility of our days. We'll also consider what's imperishable, what we carry forward and pass on to those who follow us. So how can we move through out pain, much of which is still so raw from this past year, onto a path forward.

There's a remarkable bond between 2 different Hebrew words that share the same root that tells us how. I realized this Fall, with the help of a fellow learner in our greater KI community, that two forms of the same word means both *security* ביטחון and *promise* הבטחה. This can mean something profound: when we keep faith with a promise, we make ourselves more safe and secure. This is because our response - what we do control - can be imbued with the promise we keep.

Of course, we cannot ever know what's around the next corner. And prayer and practices are never going to be a guarantee that someone won't try to harm us or those whom we love, but what it can do is still important: it can remind us of who we are and of what we're living for.

We turn promise-keeping into safe-keeping by taking what we can control - our responses to what shows up in life - and acting our way forward, from a year of indescribable pain, to find our way to our promise - the promises we keep and the potential promise we have within us.

Today I want to tell two stories - both action-oriented - as we said last night, small deeds go around the block in the time it takes thoughts and feelings to shift out of neutral gear.

One from Oct 7 itself. Another that lasted from that darkest of days in Jewish history until September 1.

First, from October 7. Our CJP February Mission met with Zohar from Kibbutz Reim. The survivors of the Kibbutz had been relocated to a temporary Tel Aviv campus while they piece-together their lives. Just as our meeting was beginning, a Kibbutz council meeting was getting going in the next door room.

Zofhar waved and pointed to Moshe moving past our group for that meeting. He was key to how we all survived, she said. He was head of Kibbutz security. Our entire Kibbutz had only six guns (including a couple of handguns). They were up against more than 100 killers who were much more heavily armed. How did they manage to hold them off with limited ammunition for 30 hours? By not trying to fight them head on. Had they, they would have all been slaughtered. Instead, they just strategically held them back to both conserve bullets and create the impression they were much more heavily armed.

Careful, adroit choices can saved lives. Yes, not every choice is as perilous as was theirs. But, everyday, we make choices about what requires *our* attention and what we can leave to the attention of others. Even more, we decide the meaning we assign to things that happen and what we do in response to those things. This is what we can choose: our response, which can give a new and different shape to the ultimate meaning of what happens.

How should we respond to some people's raw-contempt for our people? As so many have and continue to. By becoming more than anti-anti semites. By discovering profoundly helpful Jewish

life-lessons on how to be resilient, stay sane, and get stronger. Spiritually thirsty newcomers show up by the handful every week at KI over the past year.

I'm sometimes asked, How I should feel about the fact that antisemites can awaken a thirst for Jewish belonging and peoplehood in ways that rabbis and educators can never match?

What I tell them is this: If it was good enough for Herzl, then it's more than good enough. Many of you know Herzl's personal story. You know that his people's Jewish traditions and our fate weren't very important to him. Then anti semitism's rude awakening led him to found and lead Zionism's rebirth of our people in our ancestral homeland.

I love Herzl's Menorah story. He describes himself gazing upon the fully lit Hanukkah Menorah that replaced the Christmas Tree he had, and widely encouraged all Vienna Jews to have, mere years earlier. Here's what he said of the shamash, servant candle: "No office is more blessed than that of a servant of light." Herzl responded to anti semitism's fatal-virus by saying, if we can't make the darkness smaller, we can enlarge the light. Whether or not he knew it, his was a beautiful and authentic Jewish response.

Keeping our *הבטחה*, our covenantal promise, and God's, no matter why we're encouraged to, and even if we don't even think of ourselves as doing so, is still paramount. Because deeds count, tally, and radiate. No matter who we do them for or why we do them. The sages say, *מתוך שלא לשמה*, even when we do something for the wrong reasons, the deed will eventually carry us to nobler motivations. Again, in Judaism we're judged by our deeds, what we actually do. What's more, those deeds can mold and even remake our intent over time.

I believe God thrives on being less-noticed. On subtlety. On *not* hoarding attention. God isn't interested in finding a good PR firm. And subtle things can be immensely powerful. Think of your functioning body parts right now. Your beating-heart. Your GI tract. We notice them when they're not working right. Yet when they're unnoticed, they're immensely powerful life-forces.

Like the 6 courageous armed members of Kibbutz Reim who chose so carefully, our choices for what something means and what to do about it, can make all the difference.

Freely choosing to commit, to interpret, and to act, these free choices also represent something we have in common with God. As God freely chooses to create and to build, so too do we. This is something I've long believed and taught. This summer with Rabbi Yitz Greenberg's terrific new book *The Triumph of Life*, I was thrilled to see him highlight our free choices as a way in which we live in God's Image. We'll get to learn again from Yitz this Fall, thanks to this year's Bonus, second *Library of Gratitude* selection which will be arriving in your homes in November.

Now, to the concrete things we can do, the actions we can take, to turn promise-keeping into safe-keeping. Time for our second story. It lasted from Oct 7 2023 until last month at the beginning of September 2024.

Carmel Gat, from Kibbutz Beeri, was a Yoga master. On the afternoon of October 7, she left their hiding place with her mother to search for food. They were captured by Hamas killers, who then murdered her mother. This was the last thing she saw before she was bound and blindfolded and stolen into dark captivity in Gaza.

As an accomplished yoga instructor, highly skilled in occupational therapy and meditation, we know from surviving witnesses that Carmel taught her fellow hostages how to meditate, how to stay alive, to survive for more than 11 months.

On September 1, she was among the six Hostages discovered murdered along with Hersh and four other precious souls from the Nova Festival.

How then might Carmel Gat's life-skill for sanity and survival enable our hope to survive? How can we apply her gifts to staying busy, doing daily things that ground us and move us forward?

By doing what Israel's pioneers did. Aviva Klompas' *Stand-Up Nation* - this year's first *Library of Gratitude* selection. Welcome Aviva. We're honored to have you praying with us and we look

forward to a Shabbat with you later this year too. *Stand-Up Nation* tells a vital story with an even more vital lesson for us today: instead of turning *inward* for self-care and triage, Israelis instinctively turned *outward*. In helping others, they found, shared, and implanted human dignity.

Again, to underscore the point these stories of *Stand-Up Nation* are entirely action-oriented.

Just a couple of brief examples. First, Erin, who'd spent time in Mumbai and then in Thailand, realized how much infection and disease could be reduced by simple handwashing. First she noticed this problem. Then she noticed something else. There was more than enough soap in the world. It just needed to get into the right hands. Hotels in the United States alone, throw out more than 5 million bars of soap every single day. So, Erin found ways to get recycled bars of soap into the hands of 10s of millions of children throughout Asia.

Then there's 67-year-old Shoshan Haran from Kibbutz Beeri, who Aviva interviewed back in January of 2023 before she was taken Hostage by Hamas terrorists last October, who murdered many of her family members and neighbors, before Shoshan was released after 50 days in captivity.

Her passion is healthy food. "Seeds are the basis for food in the world," she says. "But the best seeds were not getting to the hungriest countries." So Shoshan founded Fair Planet in 2012 to reverse a trend that finds 9% of the world's population going to bed hungry each night.

Today Fair Planet partners with 9 of the largest seed growing companies in the world. What makes their approach *so* effective throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America, is important for us today. They resist the copy-and-paste approach so common in NGO efforts to grow in scale. They know that cultures vary even more than climates do. Some prefer round tomatoes, others long-thin ones; some need less sun, others more saturated soil. They use bottle caps to measure fertilizer volume and rotate crops differently, depending on the region.

There's something about resisting a one-size fits all approach that feels fitting for us today, here, as each one of us seeks to seed and fertilize, a plentiful year of growth in 5785. You and you

alone know what you need to do. You and you alone get to feel your worries and wish your wishes.

Our prayers are the same prayers. But your path from pain to promise will need to follow your own unique steps forward.

And yes, I know I'm talking to you right now about food and washing ourselves, on a day when we don't do either.

Today, we prioritize spiritual health over physical needs. This is because how our spirit can awaken our resolve, may us feel spry with potential for what tomorrow may bring. This is how Carmel Gat helped hostages feel light in unimaginably dark places and it can train us to stay safe, and sane and morally strong.

Some losses can help us find new insights, to reveal new strengths that we didn't know we had in us.

This past winter, Debbie and I visited a site in ancient Jerusalem that only recently was unearthed, after 2000 years. It's a Lost and Found. It's an excavated platform on which anyone who lost or found an object would stand. It served Jerusalem's Temple pilgrims for a milenia. Perhaps lost and found also applies to faith, to hope in the future after such a devastating year.

I'm calling today's message: Loss and Found. May we, like that ultra-orthodox rabbi from the Burial Society who found himself spiritually numb, may find our own ways to turn our pain into a path back to our people.

When we do, we'll also be doing the world a favor when we do.

Some years ago, Elie Weisel told a Chabad Rabbi: I like your Lubavitcher Rebbe's notion of Messianic era. When it eventually comes. People all around the world won't be Jewish. They'll

be human beings who have become more human. How will this happen? It will happen because those who are Jewish will have become more authentically Jewish.

May the promises *we keep, ever keep us* - spiritually, emotionally, and communally safer. Our *הבטחות* promises having bolstered our *ביטחון* security. And may the memories of our *losses* help us to have *found* moral strength by freely choosing the *outward turn*. And may our generosity move through our pain to find a path back to our people's true purpose.