

Seeing G(o)od in Everything

Seudat Shlishit – Ki Tisa 5785

Yahrzeits for Abraham Leidner and Seymour Hefter, a”h

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We live in extraordinarily chaotic times. Antisemitism around the world exploded during and after October 7, 2023. Wars continue. Governments topple. DOGE decimates. Changes are happening around us.

Yet, the Jewish people endure. A few weeks ago, I stood on Kobe’s Hill, now officially renamed Heroes’ Hill in Sderot, located about a mile from the Gaza border. From atop this tall hill, I looked to the south and could make out the grayish rubble of Beit Hanoun in northeast Gaza. It was all peaceful that day as there is a ceasefire. But I could only imagine what it must have been like the day the mechablīm entered Sderot on white, pickup trucks and indiscriminately massacred everyday people over a three-day period. Utter chaos and destruction.

And then I turned and looked to the Ahuza neighborhood just to the north below me. There, Israelis are currently building a neighborhood of exquisite homes, with fountains and manicured landscapes on lots over 8,000 square feet in size. And of course, you can see beautiful mezuzot covers on the doorposts of these houses. Extraordinary. What emunah.

When my father-in-law, Avraham Leidner, arrived in the United States in 1939, it was from a chaos in Poland that the world did not yet appreciate. His family, including his parents, sister, brother-in-law, and their baby did not survive. He arrived in the United States speaking only Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew, sponsored by a relative, and had no occupation. He learned English by sitting in a library and slowly making his way through progressively more complicated books.

“Abe”, as he was often called, worked himself up from performing menial jobs to a long career in sales and marketing and climbed the immigrant economic ladder. He met an Orthodox girl from Brownsville, married and moved to Fall River, MA, later moving to Mattapan and developing a close relationship with both the Rav and the Talner Rebbe. He fulfilled his dream of making Aliyah. Extraordinary. What emunah.

My father, Tzemach ben Yosef, was born on the Lower East side to a family living in the tenements and just barely getting by. He loved playing street stickball and going to shul with his friends. His father, like most of his peers, had to work on Shabbos to keep a job and literally put food on the table. My father, who tried to be as Shomer Shabbos as he could,

would leave shul right after davening to help his dad carry the cardboard stock that his father sold to others. They would return home later in the afternoon for a Shabbos meal.

My father attended high school, entered the United States Navy at 17, and, after the war ended, attended City College where he graduated with a degree in Social Work. He met an Orthodox girl from Washington Heights, moved to Hartford for graduate school, and took a job in Elizabeth, NJ where he started our family. He spent his entire career working in the Jewish community, primarily within the JCC world, focusing on education and experiential Jewish learning. While he didn't make Aliyah, he was blessed to be buried at the kibbutz in Israel, Kvutzat Yavne, that he so loved visiting for decades. Extraordinary. What emunah.

Both these men were observant Jews and had tremendous bitachon in the being-ness of the Jewish people. Both saw the influence of God in Jewish history and both appreciated, in ways more direct and deeper than perhaps we can in our day, the Judaism they knew and practiced. Why didn't they just give up? So many Jews did.

I believe the reason for their Jewish resilience and their Jewish confidence stemmed from a deep-seated belief that God is always with us – imo anochi b'tzara – I, says God, am with you in challenging times.

In Sefer Bereishit, Sidrat VaYigash (44:4), HaShem informs Yaakov Avinu that, “Anochi AyRaid Imcha”, I, God, will descend to Eretz Mitzrayim with you. Of course, we know that HaShem is everywhere and in every time. Anthropomorphically, HaShem is comforting Yaakov and, equally as important, Bnay Yisrael, as they look to begin their sojourn in a strange land. We find a similar idea in Sefer Yeshayahu (63:9) where the Navi states: “Bechol tzaratam lo tzar” – in all of your struggles, your struggle is also My struggle.

Adds the Sfat Emet (1893) – Yes, we believe that HaShem is with us when we experience challenges. But the truth is that intertwined with this belief is a focus on the exquisite bitachon of Bnay Yisrael. Why? Because we accept these challenges in the Name of HaShem. This is what the Pasuk means in Sefer Tehillim (91:15) from a chapter we recite every Shabbat – Imo Anochi B'Tzara –HaShem is with us even in times of struggle. This Emunah is celebrated by HaShem, as it were, when God says – I know that you carry Me everywhere you go and I am confident that you will take Me with you to Mitzrayim. As a result, HaShem promises that we will also, one day, leave that place – “v'Anochi A-Alcha Gam Alo”. And I, as Anochi, will lift you and certainly bring you up (from Mitzrayim).

But there is more. Even in a time of geulah, we are also a people who, while remembering the challenges that we have experienced, also celebrate the better times with a view characterized by l'shem shamayim - for the sake of Heaven. This, says the Sfat Emet, is the greater challenge for a person. For one who takes HaShem with them at a time of peace

and joy (when it is so easy to forget that it was HaShem who brought us to that place – especially on these days of Purim when it seems that HaShem was absent from the narrative), this is also the person with whom HaShem will join in times of challenge.

The Gemara (Shabbat 118a/b) alludes to this idea in relation to Shabbat when it tells us the dictum of R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yosei: “Kol hame-aneg et ha-shabbat zoche l’nachalat Yaakov, nachala bli metzarim” - Anyone who delights in the Shabbat is provided with a portion that knows no limits. As the Torah states – ZaChor et Yom HaShabbat – keep the Shabbat in your focus.

How so? If you come across a great looking piece of food at the store or a beautiful new piece of clothing during the week, say to yourself – “let’s set this aside Shabbat”. The idea again is that one relates to the mitzvah of Shabbat (a day with quite a long list of don’ts) with joy and positive expectations. You delight in the Shabbat and HaShem will reward you for your commitment but even more so for your attitude.

We recognize that among the many names of HaShem is the special name called “Shabbat”. Why? Because Shabbat honors the God who stopped the creative, good process at the end of the sixth Day and rested, forever modeling for us what it means to create goodness, develop, and build, and then rest. Thus, we recognize the closeness of HaShem and HaShem reciprocates with blessing us. Anochi ayraid v’Anochi A-alcha. HaShem promises to accompany us when things get tough and HaShem promises to be with us when those times turn to joy.

Both Saba Avraham and Zayde Hefter were aware of the closeness of Hakadosh Baruch Hu in their lives, in different ways that reflect their different life experiences. Their emunah, forged through lifetimes of great tragedy and triumph of the Jewish people, sustained them and propelled them always forwards.

May their examples bring zechuyot for their neshamot and may we merit to follow in their footsteps during our trajectories in Olam HaZeh as part of the glorious history of Bnay Yisrael.