



INTRODUCTION

THERE IS a kabbalistic tradition that Jewish faith and spirituality consist of three elements: God, Torah, and Israel. When these three strands are braided together, we plait the three-cord rope of spirituality. SAPIR invited three rabbis to reflect on the sources of spiritual resilience for themselves, their communities, and the Jewish people, and to offer their thoughts on how to strengthen their resilience in a time of jeopardy.

God. Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, founding rabbi of Kehilat Zion in Jerusalem and co-founder of the Beit Midrash for Israeli Rabbis at the Hartman Institute, offers an interpretation of God’s creation informed by personal and Jewish history. Her story has been shortened and translated from Hebrew.

Torah. Lauren Holtzblatt, rabbi of Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C., looks to a page of Talmud about Rabbi Akiva, who lived and died under the Roman occupation of Judaea, for guidance through the waves of Jewish history.

Israel. Zohar Atkins, founder of Etz Hasadeh Center for Existential Torah Study, places our current moment in the context of Jewish theology, the Jewish condition, and Zionism.

—*The Editors*

God

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM



ON DECEMBER 21, 1944, my grandfather, Eliezer Cerf, was captured by the Nazis. He and his friends from the Loren Group of the French Resistance had been fighting for several months, after the Nazis had gathered the residents of Oradour-sur-Glane into a church and burned them alive. My grandfather and his fellow partisans were placed before a firing squad. When the senior Nazi commander asked whether anyone would like to say any last words, my grandfather raised his head and said, “Yes. I am a Jew.” To the group’s astonishment, the commander decided not to kill the entire group, thanks to my grandfather’s courage.

What gave my grandfather the strength to face down a firing squad and choose, as his last words of life, a refusal to surrender? What made it possible for my brother, Nadav Elad, of blessed memory, to serve years later as an elite paratrooper in the IDF, knowing he might well fall in defense of his country, as he did? What made it possible for my daughters to sit with us this past Simchat Torah, October 7, “Black Shabbat,” singing Shabbat songs and embracing while the alarms sounded outside our home? What is the source of persistent resolve I see in my community, in the families of the hostages, in bereaved families, in those who have no home to go back to, in those injured in body and soul?

The answer, I believe, can be found in the opening words of the Torah we read on that tragic day.

When God began to create Heaven and Earth—the Earth being

unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water. (Genesis 1:1-2)

The Psikta Zutarta, a midrashic commentary from the 11th century, interprets this cryptic description of the primordial universe word by word. *Unformed*—a thing that perplexes people. *Void*—a thing that terrifies a person. *Darkness*—the darkness that darkens a person.

Pre-creation was an abyss of dangerous and confusing chaos. As the 16th-century Prague rabbi Yehuda Leib ben Bezalel teaches, the creation of light was a defiant response to that darkness. “And God said: ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.” (Genesis 1:3)

And so from Earth’s very beginning, one of the moral and spiritual imperatives is the resilience of resistance. The world presents a perplexing and terrifying darkness, and it is our role, as it was God’s, not to succumb to it but to continuously light it anew. It is a sacred rebellion against the nihilism of the non-world. The reason the Torah itself begins this way, with light as an antidote to darkness, the life force awakening despite trauma, is to teach us that there are indeed moments in life, and in human history, when we find ourselves at the edge of nothingness, and it is at these moments that we are called not to surrender to the extremism and totality of darkness and chaos but rather to loyally resist by defending and protecting the holiness of life and light. The response to the firing squad is to demonstrate one word of life in the face of death, one glimpse of light in the face of darkness. So does a grandfather pass down the tradition of resistance to his granddaughter. And in the face of terrorist and human destruction, it is the inspiration to save every possible life and rebuild.

The Torah, in its testimony of truth—including stories of evil, hatred, slavery, and indifference—bears witness to the dark human abyss of constant ethical distortion and moral defeat that attempts to intrude upon the light of Earth’s perpetual creation, returning it to chaotic darkness.

But in the Torah's account of the triumph over this evil, it tells us of our forefathers and mothers, all wounded and giant teachers in our holy journal of trauma and recovery, who ignited life humbly and faithfully again and again, with resilience, resistance, and inspiration.

These are dark days of hatred and extremism. Earth as we know it is being unformed and void, with darkness engulfing hope, tolerance, and the sanctity of all life. Yet, from within our broken hearts we can choose every day to pledge our allegiance to God's moral and spiritual imperative, and say: "Let there be light."

One day at a time, one light at a time, one person at a time, humbly and faithfully, with resilience, resistance, and inspiration. May we be worthy to walk in the footsteps of giants, of grandparents and brothers, with our families and communities. May we save every life, spread light to all, and rebuild. May we add our chapter in the Book of Life.

Torah

LAUREN HOLTZBLATT



RABBI AKIVA has been my teacher for many years. Famously, the first- and second-century sage did not begin to study Torah until the age of 40, then spent the next 24 years mastering this demanding discipline and becoming one of the most important and memorable rabbis of his time and ours. And when the Romans banned the study of Torah, he defied them, continuing to teach and learn it at great risk to himself.

His fortitude in clinging to his heritage rather than forfeiting his agency is reflected in one of my favorite stories in the Talmud. Rabban Gamliel, a contemporary of Rabbi Akiva's, recounts having once

seen a shipwreck in the distance while traveling on a boat. Knowing that Rabbi Akiva had been onboard, Gamliel began to grieve. But no sooner did Gamliel arrive on dry land than Rabbi Akiva himself approached him, sat down, and immediately engaged him in discussion about a matter of law. Rabban Gamliel, in near-euphoric disbelief, asked Rabbi Akiva who had “raised him” from the water. Akiva responded, apparently nonchalant, “A plank from the boat came to me, and I bent my head before each and every wave that came toward me” (Yevamot 121a).

In the plainest reading of the text, Rabbi Akiva holds on to a wooden plank and rides the waves until he is deposited on dry land. But the word the Talmud uses for “plank” here — *daf*— is instructive. Its more common meaning is “page” — as in, a page of the Talmud. In a deeper, metaphorical reading, Rabbi Akiva is referring to the Talmud, the compendium of Jewish law and lore, as the plank that saves us from the waves of history, even when our ship has been destroyed. It is the page of Talmud, itself containing remnants from the Temple, our ship destroyed, that keeps us afloat in stormy seas.

I have thought about this teaching many times since October 7, holding onto the *daf* as the violence and trauma continue for the hostages that still remain in Gaza, the many displaced from the south and north of Israel, and the innocent Palestinian civilians. I find myself asking, “What are the pages we’re meant to hold on to?”

Perhaps it is Makkot 24, the final *daf* of the tractate, which offers more than one instance of Akiva’s setting Rabban Gamliel and the other sages of the time straight. Ascending the Temple Mount after the destruction, they witness a fox exiting the Holy of Holies. The other sages present begin to weep, saying, “Of this place it is written, ‘And the non-priest who approaches shall die’ (Numbers 1:51), and now foxes walk in it.”

Rabbi Akiva’s reaction is the exact opposite: laughter, a eureka kind of laughter. The moment reminds Akiva of a different verse, Micah 3:12,

in which Uriah, from the time of the First Temple, offers the prophecy that “Zion shall be plowed as a field” like the kind where foxes trot. But there is another verse in Zechariah, from the time of the Second Temple, which in Akiva’s time had just been destroyed: “There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem” (Zechariah 8:4). A verse in Isaiah juxtaposes the two: “And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to attest: Uriah the priest, and Zechariah” (Isaiah 8:2).

Rabbi Akiva, characteristically holding on to the *daf*, explains:

Until the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariah would not be fulfilled. Now that the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, it is evident that the prophecy of Zechariah remains valid. The Sages said to him: Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us.

This is Rabbi Akiva’s *daf*, reminding us that Jerusalem will rise again. The *daf* has kept us afloat for millenia, and it will bring us to dry land.

May our written tradition give us strength and may we all be blessed with peace.

Israel

ZOHAR ATKINS



I AM LONELY,” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once wrote, “because, in my humble, inadequate way, I am a man of faith for whom to be means to believe, and who substituted ‘credo’ for ‘cogito’ in the time-honored Cartesian maxim,” *cogito ergo sum*.

I was reminded of this line recently upon seeing a cover of *The*

Economist featuring a solitary, battered Israeli flag beneath the headline “Israel Alone.” Many took umbrage by pointing out that Israel is not, in fact, alone. When Iran launched an attack on Israel last month, it wasn’t just the U.S. and U.K. that rose to its defense. Jordan and Saudi Arabia also came to Israel’s aid, helping shoot down missiles and drones. Unlike when Israel unilaterally destroyed Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, to great condemnation from the Reagan administration (and nearly everyone else except the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*), Israel finds itself far from alone, with a host of friends and allies.

Not alone, but, somehow, still lonely. As Soloveitchik knew and tried to teach us, loneliness is fundamental and perennial to the Jewish experience — and its greatest gift.

The difference between aloneness and loneliness was well defined by Hannah Arendt, who saw aloneness in solitude and loneliness in the crowd:

Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others ... the lonely man finds himself surrounded by others with whom he cannot establish contact or to whose hostility he is exposed.

Our loneliness began with Joseph. Bullied as a child because of his chosenness, Joseph was nearly murdered by his envious brothers, hurled into a pit, enslaved, imprisoned, abandoned by those he had helped. So, in his adulthood, he learned to pass. An Egyptian in speech, manner, and clothing, when he finally revealed himself to his brothers, it was because he “could no longer control himself before all his attendants.” The loneliness of his identity had become too much to bear. “So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers” (Genesis 45:1). He chose to be alone with them, the

very family members with whom he had experienced such early strife.

Israel is the Joseph of the nations.

In the early-20th century, on the eve of the Holocaust, the philosopher Hermann Cohen sought to prove that the Jews are even more Kantian—and thus more German—than the Germans. At the moment he was trying to show that Judaism is perfectly compatible with Enlightenment universalism, German culture was sliding into anti-Enlightenment romanticism. Cohen died before witnessing the consequences of relying on German idealism. But his legacy is alive and well in many pockets of Diaspora—and particularly American—Jewish life, where we hear echoes of this sentiment: “We are the good Jews; we aren’t settler Jews, Haredi Jews, billionaire Jews, tribalist Jews, etc. Let us pass and we will denounce as backward and primitive our embarrassing, extended Jewish family, and the country where half of that global family lives.” The desire to hide, born of trauma, is understandable. But antisemites don’t distinguish between Joseph and Judah. Hamas attacks synagogues, farms, and music festivals. Campus radicals tell Jewish students, “Go back to Poland.”

That loneliness we feel is a function of having been chosen: “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). God was lonely in holiness and created man to partner with him.

The loneliness we carry manifests itself in many forms and moments. Bringing ethical monotheism to the world, and then being told we worship the wrong God. Being asked to assimilate, and then being accused of having done so nefariously. Contributing much to humanity, and then being called subhuman. Achieving an unprecedentedly low ratio of civilian-to-combatant deaths in an impossible urban war, and at that moment being accused of genocide.

“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). The loneliness has been, except for some brief historical respites, inescapable. But the reward we gain by going through

this crucible is a deeper and stronger sense of self, the realization that our worth as individuals and as Jews does not depend on the judgment of others.

Zionism is the expression of that sense of self-worth. We are called not to be like all the other nations, but to be unique among them.

“I the Lord have called unto you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people’s covenant, as a light unto the nations” (Isaiah 42:6). *