Commentary

JULY/AUGUST 2025 JUDAISM

Having Faith While in Hell

Jewish Commentary

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

THIS COLUMN IS ABOUT FAITH AND MIRACLES, AND IT BEGINS WITH AN EVENT wondrous to behold: the *New York Time*s publishing a thoughtful, balanced, and inspiring article pertaining to the current moment in Israel.

The article features an interview with Omer Shem Tov, who until recently was held in cruel captivity by Hamas. Omer, the *Times* tells us, "had grown up in a largely secular home, and was living a relatively carefree existence after completing his compulsory military service." Then, on October 7, 2023, he was suddenly snatched and subjected to torture in cramped surroundings for a year and a half. It was as a hostage that Shem Tov embraced the faith of his fathers:

> A few days into his captivity, he said, he began to speak to God. He made vows. He began to bless whatever food he was given. And he had requests—some of which he believes were answered. "You are looking for something to lean on, to hold onto," Mr. Shem Tov said in a recent interview at his family home in Herzliya, north of Tel Aviv. "The first place I went to was God. I would feel a power enter me," he said.
> "Faith kept me going," he said, adding, "I always believed I would get home, though I didn't know how or when."

Shem Tov's embrace of Jewish observance was not limited to prayer. We are further informed that he "decided to keep kosher as much as he could, eating either the cheese or the canned meat when they were given both, in line with Jewish dietary laws that prohibit mixing meat and dairy products." The *Times* concludes by describing how Shem Tov "promised God that if he got home, he would pray daily with 'tefillin'—the small leather boxes containing scriptures that worshipers tie onto their heads and one of their arms for morning prayers." The article features a photo depicting Omer Shem Tov doing just that.

At this point, we must pause to ponder what might appear paradoxical. A young man has lived a largely secular life. Many in his circle, it is safe to say, would welcome an age in which Jews were "normalized," in which they would be a people like any other, in which they would be left alone to create the Silicon Valley of the Middle East. Yet suddenly, at the very moment when he is being tortured for his Jewish identity, and when many of his fellow concert attendees at the Nova festival were murdered for the very same reason, his reaction is to embrace Judaism.

In this, Omer Shem Tov captures, in a certain sense, the story of Zionism itself. In 1897, a secular Jew, Theodore Herzl, had promised the possibility of normalization in his pamphlet *The Jewish State.* Living among Europeans, he argued, Jews would continue to be hated, but if a separate Jewish state could be created elsewhere, anti-Semitism would cease. The state Herzl originally described had little that was Jewish in its civic character. But not long after, as the Zionist movement suddenly and mysteriously, began to spread, the assimilated Austrian journalist began the ponder with wonder the history of which he was a part.

The result was a short story, "The Menorah," in which Herzl describes a Jewish artist overcome with "secret psychic torment" due to the hatred for Jews around the world. The result, Herzl tells us, is that the artist "experienced a change that he might never have in better days, because he had become so alienated: He began to love Judaism with great fervor." As with Omer's story, Herzl recognized why the plot might appear paradoxical:

How could something that only meant an intensification and deepening of the malady be a remedy? He, on the other hand, thought that the moral distress of modern Jews was so acute because they had lost the spiritual counterpoise which our strong forefathers had possessed.

The result, Herzl is telling us, is not paradoxical at all; only Judaism itself could provide the "spiritual counterpoise" necessary to forge a future for the Jewish people in the face of hate. Similarly, the *Times* article tells us of a motto that the Israeli hostages made their mantra. They heard it from Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who cited the philosopher and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, words originally from Nietzsche: "He who has a why can bear with any how." Facing difficulties—and these hostages faced circumstances more difficult than can be imagined—requires endurance, and endurance is sustained above all by the feeling that one is part of something much larger than one's self.

Held hostage in hell, Omer Shem Tov sought to grapple with his "how" by looking for his "why." Confronted with the Nazis of our age, he discovered what Herzl called spiritual counterpoise. In this, Shem Tov was not alone. The *Times* devotes a portion of this article to charting the spiritual arc in the lives of certain hostages, even as it gives equally essential space to a description of the evil inflicted upon them by Hamas. We are told that Eli Sharabi, whose emaciated image upon emerging from captivity reminded so many of the Holocaust, would recite daily the sacred liturgical passage known as the Shema, and he did so "in the dark, dank tunnel space he shared with other hostages, and had tried every Sabbath eve to make kiddush, the blessing over wine, though they only had water."

The persistence of anti-Semitism does not mean that the Jewish state is less vital—it is, in fact, more so. But because this hate persists, resiliency is required. Fortunately, in an event unpredicted by many of Israel's secular founders, the wonder of Jews at the story of Israel, and of why the world's attention is continuously upon them, why they are always attacked by the egregiously evil, has led many back to faith. Israel is the very rare example of a Western-style

democracy that has grown more religious, rather than less, in the last half century. The Jewish state is a vital embodiment of Jewish self-determination and self-defense, but it also a reflection of the fact that the Jewish story is anything but normal, that it is miraculous. And as more Jews discover the "why," the more they can bear with any "how."

To read Omer's story is to recall an experience during the Yom Kippur War recounted by Israel Meir Lau, later chief rabbi of Israel. Lau was visiting a soldier in the hospital whose head was entirely ensconced in bandages. The soldier, named Yehuda, had grown up secular, yet his first request upon waking was to inquire about placing tefillin. Curious as to why such an individual would be so eager to perform this profoundly religious ritual, Lau was told by the soldier that an encounter with providence had inspired him to take on the daily ritual.

While serving in the Sinai during the festival of Sukkot, several Chabad Hasidim had shown up in a truck, upon which was the holiday hut for which the festival was named. The Hasidim entreated the soldier to leave his jeep to say a blessing in the sukkah, and the soldier reluctantly complied:

> Suddenly they heard a deafening explosion. They all threw themselves onto the floor of the truck, feeling their bodies to make sure all their limbs were intact. When they glanced outside, they discovered that the command car, where they had been sitting a minute ago, had taken a direct hit. Not a fragment of it remained. When quiet reigned once more, Second Lieutenant Yehuda said to one of the Chabad men, "You would probably call what happened here a miracle." The Chabad man answered him with a question: "What would you call it?"

A people returns to its land from all over the world after so many centuries; a state is reborn; it survives enemy after enemy; and it endures. Some would call it a miracle; indeed, more and more Jews in Israel are realizing that we can call it

nothing else. And in a world where even the *Times* can take a brief break from libeling Israel, and give us this story of faith, we must ponder what wonders are yet to come.

Photo: Amir Levy/Getty Images

We want to hear your thoughts about this article. Click here to send a letter to the editor.