

**Remembering Kfir, Ariel, Oded and Shiri:  
Choosing Optimism Against Our Better Judgement  
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Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was once quoted as saying, "I am a hopeful person by nature," an "optimist against my better judgment."

I think that Heschel could have been describing the Jewish people, who have long been optimists against all rationality or reason. The greatest example of this is the fact that Israel's national anthem is Hatikvah: the hope. A sentiment that was chosen, in spite of our history.

This has been a week where one might argue that, for those who love and care for Israel and its people, being an optimist might, indeed, be against our better judgement.

We saw the 4 caskets: 2 carrying young children, Ariel and Kfir, a 4 year old and an 11 month old. Another carrying a man of 82 years, Oded Lifshitz, who devoted much of his life to the cause of co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis. He and his wife were involved with an organization called Road to Recovery, taking Gazans to Israeli hospitals.

And then there is Shiri. The mother, that her family and the people of Israel thought was being returned yesterday, was not. The photo that Hamas proudly published has seared itself into our memories. A young mother holding on to her children with that terrified look on her face as she was being taken to Gaza, knowing that the protection she could offer her children was disappearing.

Jews around the world held on to those children and the hope that they would somehow survive. We came to know them by the pictures that the parents Yarden and Shiri had so lovingly created. Any rational person would know that the chances of their survival were minimal, and yet so many of us held on to the possibility that we might see them alive. Why? Because I think that their survival would represent a ray of hope in this terrible darkness that Hamas unleashed on October 7 - upon Israel and, ultimately, on its own people. Thinking of their return gave us a respite from a world community that chose not to care about the more than 200 hostages and those two beautiful red-haired children.

The indignities did not end there. Yoseph Haddad, an Arab Israeli noted that on the caskets prepared in Gaza for the two boys was an inscription in Arabic with the date of their arrest. Haddad, a television commentator, looked into the camera and asked the right question: "What kind of crime can an infant commit that he would be arrested at the age of 9 months!?"

Being an optimist these days, seems like an act against our better judgement after coming face to face with such hatred, such evil. It would be so much easier to give voice to our rage in this moment. That is, to express our outrage at those whose hatred towards us runs so deep that parents brought their children to witness the macabre spectacle of Hamas' handing over the caskets of 4 innocent souls to the Red Cross. People who were murdered for the "sin" of being Jewish and having the audacity to live

on the land of their historical forebears. While Hamas has been clear about their unwillingness to accept a Jewish State in Israel from its inception, it is the same message that Palestinian children are taught whenever they open their textbooks and see a map of the Middle East with Palestine where Israel currently exists, or walk down a street named for a terrorist with Jewish blood on their hands. Their issue is not with the borders of a Palestinian State, but with the very existence of Israel.

How can anyone speak of hope or optimism on a day like today! And yet, where would Jews be without hope? It is the name of our national anthem. Anyone who knows anything about Jewish history would be aware that this is not the first time that Jews have faced such soul crushing moments. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair."

Consider the world of Shlomo Elkabetz who lived in Safed in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Many of the residents of Safed were exiled from Spain. Jewish persecution throughout the world was rampant and Jewish Jerusalem lay in ruins. It was in Safed that Elkabetz chose to dream of a Jerusalem renewed and the Jewish people, redeemed, joined with God in the Friday night prayer: *Lecha Dodi*.

Alkabetz chose hope over despair.

הַתְּנַעֲרִי מֵעָפָר קוֹמִי. לְבָשִׁי בְּגָדֵי תִפְאָרְתְּךָ עַמִּי  
עַל יָד בֶּן יִשְׁי בֵּית הַלְחָמִי. קַרְבָּה אֶל נַפְשִׁי גְאֻלָּה

Speaking to Jerusalem, Alkabetz wrote:

Shake off your dust, arise!

And to the people of Israel: Put on your glorious garments, my people, and pray: "Be near to my soul, and redeem it through the son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite."

הַתְּעוֹרְרִי הַתְּעוֹרְרִי. כִּי בָא אֹרֶךְ  
קוֹמִי אֹרֶי  
עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי שִׁיר דְּבָרִי. כְּבוֹד ה' עָלֶיךָ נִגְלָה

Awake, awake, for your light has come; arise and shine! Awake, awake, utter a song; the Lord's glory is revealed upon you.

There is an optimism that goes against rational judgement. It goes to the very core of what it means to be a Jew, despite the barbarism that we have been witness to since October 7<sup>th</sup>.

At the end of the prayer, it is our tradition to greet the mourners and welcome them into a loving and supportive congregation. So tonight, we will send our payers of comfort to the Bibas and Lifshitz families as we mourn with them.

But I remind you that we are not mourners alone. I ask you to consider the importance of choosing optimism over despair, over our heartbreak and rage. Let us stand as optimists when we come to the end of the prayer even though it feels like it is against our best judgement. Bari Weiss is fond of saying that, "Jews have had been on vacation from history!" Well, that vacation has ended for our brothers and sisters in

Israel and for the Jews of the Diaspora. It is time to focus less on the pain of this moment and on a better future.

After October 7<sup>th</sup>, Tali Versano Eisman, an Israeli psychologist and children's author, wrote a poem that captures these ideas beautifully.

כְּשֶׁאֲנִי טוֹבַעַת  
אֵין לִי צָרָה שְׁתִּתְאַרְוּ לִי אֶת הַמַּיִם  
לֹא אֶת צְבָעָם, לֹא אֶת עֲמֻקָּם  
הֲרִי אֲנִי חֹשֶׁה אוֹתָם עַד צְנֹאֲרִי  
יֵשׁ לִי רַק בִּקְשָׁה  
אַל תִּחְדְּלוּ לְרַגַע מִלְתַּאֲר לִי  
אֵיךְ נִרְאִית  
הַיְבֻשָׁה

*When I'm drowning,  
I don't need you to describe the water to me,  
Not its color, not its depth,  
For I feel it up to my neck.  
I only ask you,  
Don't ever stop describing  
What the dry land looks like.*

After the bodies of Ariel and Kfir were identified yesterday, we felt the feeling of despair washed over us in such a way that it would be easy to drown in our own tears. We owe it to Kfir, Ariel Oded and Shiri to do more than to succumb to our sadness. Choosing to confront the darkness that threatens us, to write a new Hatikvah, a new anthem of Hope, where parents will not have to worry that their children suffer the fate of Kfir and Ariel. Let us choose optimism. Let us choose hope and the belief that we will get to the dry land, create a new, better, and more secure age for Israel and all those who choose to accept the Jewish State and live in peace with us. We can yet build the renewed Jerusalem described in L'cha Dodi. Let us embrace the very Jewish optimism of Shlomo Elkabetz and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

(Sing L'cha Dodi.)

As we rise for Kaddish, I ask that we commit to carrying Kfir, Ariel, Shiri and Oded in the same spirit that EE Cummings wrote in his poem *I Carry Your Heart*.

here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;  
which grows higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart  
i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)