

“Despair and its Antidote”

If you don't feel despair as the events of the world pile up around us, you are in denial. Or you are blissfully self-medicated. Or you have mastered the art of taking the long view. Perhaps you remember many periods of hopelessness in history, and you note that we have transcended all of them. Therefore, you retain hope in the face of despairing news. That is an admirable, if nearly unachievable, state of mind, but one worth striving for.

Despair in Hebrew is *yeyush*. It can refer to the act of giving up hope when a loved one disappears at sea and seems unlikely to return. One holds out hope for a reasonable amount of time, and then one is halakhically permitted to declare *yeyush*, which allows the person to embrace resignation, to mourn, and to move on. *Yeyush*, then, can be a good thing, if only in the sense of providing closure, and maybe a modicum of sanity.

But *yeyush* is also the depressing sensation one develops when it becomes impossible to move on, when closure would amount to denial, even to irresponsibility.

“How can I sit here and watch while such-and-such terrible things keep happening?” one might cry. “Or when so-and-so perpetrates evil again and again and gets away with it? How can I not speak up and speak out?”

That's the cry of someone who has not yet abandoned hope. By contrast, the person who comes to the bitter conclusion that nothing we say or do will help has embodied an awful and overwhelming despair. It is an emotion that keeps us from acting even when we want to, even when we feel commanded by our religious tradition to do so.

We can tick off the most recent occurrences that conspire to bring us down to a state of inaction and worse.

For one, a string of mass shootings inspired by a white supremacist “replacement theory,” paired with the insistence that military-grade gun ownership constitutes the very definition of American personal liberty.

For another, the turning of a complex medical and ethical issue – namely the legality of abortion - into an ideological tug of war between several religious minorities’ definitions of fetal viability and personhood against those of numerous other religious traditions like our own, to the end that any number of Americans may soon be denied one of their basic *religious* freedoms.

Looming large over all of these is the Russian aggression against Ukraine, leading to ongoing, unspeakable crimes against humanity.

We can and must list many more such items. They come from all sides of the spectrum, even the precious middle. No one party, philosophy, or country owns the monopoly on hate, hatefulness, and the distortion of truth in order to defeat their foes by squeezing the hope out of them.

As Jews, we long ago came to realize that we would be caught in the middle of these historical wars; that we would be identified as the source of everyone’s problems and the cause of everyone’s woes. Long ago, we recognized that whenever someone started shooting Blacks or targeting gays, we would also find ourselves in their crosshairs. That when someone started victimizing immigrants, we were going to be blamed for fomenting border conspiracies. That when someone tried to disenfranchise segments of the population, we were going to be fingered as abettors of political malfeasance when we stepped in to get everyone

counted. That when school curricula introduced explorations of racial discrimination in the American story, we were going to be seen as the troublemakers we've always been thought to be. That when abortion rights were being rolled back, we were bound to be seen as suspicious for defending those rights, not as practitioners of an ancient alternative religious vision, but as godless secularists who deny the sacredness of life.

Perhaps it is *shver tzu zeyn a yid*, hard to be a Jew, because so much of what happens around us contradicts our understanding of right and wrong, moral and immoral, just and unjust. And because as long as we keep letting our understanding be public, we subject ourselves to endangerment. And because every time we deny the moral imperative in our tradition, it backfires.

Yes, many of us may be "white," or "wealthy," or "educated and credentialed," or "upper-middle class," and so on. All of those things are true, but they do not define us negatively or positively. They are descriptors, but they are not our essence. Our essence must continue to be *Yisrael*, a multi-racial, multi-ethnic holy people who struggle with God as we strive to focus the world on Godliness.

When I traveled to the southeastern corner of Poland in March to bring medical supplies to Ukraine and to witness the stream of refugees fleeing to safety, I saw a partial remedy for *yeyush*. I saw people of many religions, creeds, races, and nationalities joining hands to aid these victims, and I saw our Jewish individuals and organizations working tirelessly in partnership with all of these good-doers from every place and people on earth. I could not help feeling that the very soil that had been cursed by the evil of the Shoah, in that very specific intersection of

lands where the Nazis carried out most of their dastardly work, was now being redeemed by this new humanitarian spirit.

Of course, nothing can redeem that evil or those who perpetrated it. And yet, what better place to show the world another way – a way of hope beyond despair.

That land is among the richest farmland on earth. It can – and often does – feed multitudes around the globe. Now it has become the staging ground for diverse peoples to show one another – and, to their surprise, themselves – what they are made of.

The fact that we Jews have prevailed through despair to reach this point in our destiny-colored historical drama shows that it is always worth it to stay our course and never lose *tikvah*, our precious modicum of hope.