

# Holding on to Our Inheritance

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The Israeli publicist Yoav Sorek, the father of 18-year-old Dvir Sorek, who was murdered by a Palestinian terrorist this past summer, shared a powerful experience he had only a few days after sitting shivah for his son. Sorek describes how while hearing Torah being read in shul by a young man about the age of his own murdered son, his eyes suddenly filled with tears and he felt overwhelmed by the privilege of being Jewish. Sorek became aware, in his own words, of “the merit of being [part of] a [Jewish religious] world that did not bequeath us any capital in the form of goods or wealth but instead with what does not always receive its due respect: our cultural capital. This “cultural capital” is a world of rich and complex values... A world that has plenty of space for non-material values, for faith, for a personal sense of belonging and continuity, a sense of obligation and being part of, a world that is in constant touch with eternity and with history. Values that give a sense of proportion to life and death.”

At the end of his reflection, Yoav Sorek adds his lament, “When I see someone straying off the path [of Jewish observance], I am not so much bothered by the sins this person will commit, or by the notion that this person is abandoning some kind of a formula that promises eternal bliss, as it were. I know the shortcomings of the religious path... And yet, I do mourn the loss of this wondrous treasure of life within the tapestry of dialogue, and of values, within a faith founded upon the love of humankind and the world. The prophet Jeremiah’s words echo within me: ‘They abandoned me, the source of living waters, in order to dig wells, broken wells that cannot contain any water.’”

<https://www.facebook.com/739164537/posts/10156790332269538?sfns=mo>

Sorek’s words serve as an apt reminder of our privilege as inheritors of the Jewish faith. His message also powerfully challenges us to hold on tightly to what he calls our cultural capital.

Regretfully, the multitude of uncertainties we currently experience, be it in our homes, in America, in Israel, or in the world, call for a personal and communal accounting of this very inheritance. What can we, as a community and as individuals, draw upon and hold onto from the tapestry of history, tradition, and faith, that Sorek so beautifully describes, that might help navigate our way forward?

This morning, allow me to offer three reflections on our Jewish inheritance that might guide our way forward, and in the words of Sorek, might also give a sense of proportion to life and death.

First, an inheritance of fear.

In an essay titled, “No Time for Neutrality”, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel offers this sobering observation, “One of the lessons we have derived from the events of our time is that we cannot dwell at ease under the sun of our civilization, that man is the least harmless of all beings. We feel how every minute in our civilization is packed with tension like the interlude between lightning and thunder. Man has not advanced very far from the coast of chaos. It took only one storm to throw him back into the sinister. If culture is to survive, it is in need of defense all along the shore. A frantic call to chaos shrieks in our blood. Many of us are too susceptible to it to ignore it forever. Where is the power that could offset the effect of that alluring call? How are we going to keep the demonic forces under control?” (R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 75)

Elie Wiesel expressed this fear in countless ways and in countless forums. Wiesel warned, “Hatred is like a cancer, and it transcends all boundaries – religious, ethnic, national. It is contagious, spreading from one person or community to another, always ending in more hatred and obstruction. When I brought together thinkers and activists to explore issues confronting humanity, I called the conferences the Anatomy of Hate, because we were trying to understand the sources of human hatred and how to respond to it. One thing we have learned: When you face evil, don’t let it grow, fight it right away. Had Hitler been fought immediately there would have been no Holocaust. Be watchful.” (Ariel Burger, *Witness*, pp. 147)

Sadly, we live in a time in which bigotry is in vogue once again. If we are to hold on to our Jewish inheritance, then we must learn to live with fear as our guide. We must remain vigilant and insist on self-reliance. Now this fear and sense of vigilance must never be self-centered. Our history has taught us that if they come for us, then eventually they’ll also always come for any other vulnerable group. We also know that if they come for any other vulnerable group, then it won’t take long until they come for us too.

We must forcefully reject voices on the right who shamelessly demonize Mexicans, Muslims, Blacks (and let us not forget that there are Jews of color in our communities) or members of the LGBTQ community (who are treasured members of our community as well).

At the same time, we must not give a pass to voices on the left who demonize Israel and Zionism and who claim they would include us in their progressive alliance if we simply gave up our claim to our history and land.

Frankly, this year in America, perhaps more than ever before, we learned in different ways that we are simply not white enough for the extreme right, and we are just too white for the extreme left.

And yet, despite all that, or perhaps better yet, precisely because of all that, we must hold on to our inheritance and remain committed to an outlook of fear, vigilance, and self-reliance.

Second, an inheritance of good deeds. This year we must hold on to small, good deeds and the belief that oftentimes small deeds can make a big difference.

In this regard, Heschel aptly taught, "Judaism is averse to generalities. Its tendency is to make ideas convertible into reality, to interpret metaphysical insights as patterns for action, to endow the most remote principles with bearing upon our everyday conduct. In its tradition the vague became definite, the abstract concrete, the absolute historic." (R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 75)

I recently read a book of commemoration in honor of Rav Yaakov Edelstein, z"l, the former chief rabbi of Ramat Hasharon. In it, journalists Yedidya Meir and Sivan Rahav-Meir capture many stories they heard while attending every day of the rabbi's shivah.

In one story a person shared how the Rav would gently bend down and pick up a dead insect or bug with tissue paper off the floor. With great care and great respect, he would go and place it in the garbage bin. "I saw him do this even in old age," the person remarked and then added, "Whoever merited to see the rabbi perform these 'small funerals' got to see a king in his full glory, who takes great care of even a little bug... If he cares about insects in this way, one can only imagine how much he cares about us." (Yedidya Meir and Sivan Rahav-Meir, *Sulam Yaakov*, p. 61)

In another story, the authors describe how countless neighbors shared that the Rav would very gently close his car door when he returned from a day's work late at night. The Rav did not wish to disturb the peace of the neighborhood.

Finally, in another story, the Rav was once picked up by a taxi driver who only wore a pair of shorts and had no shirt on. The driver drove the Rav to Bnei Brak, a Haredi city in Israel. Upon arriving, the driver helped the rabbi out of the taxi, and many people passing by looked on with shock and dismay. Before parting, the Rav turned to the driver and in a loud voice asked the man to bless him. Moments later,

people lined up before this shirtless man, asking for a blessing as well. They explained, "If the Rav wants your blessing, surely so do we". (Yedidya Meir and Sivan Rahav-Meir, *Sulam Yaakov*, p. 72)

Each of these stories may seem meaningless, or at least trivial, when compared with the sort of crises enveloping our world. And yet consider a lifetime of these small deeds, consider this rabbi's book of life, as it were, and the impact this one person made on an entire city and many countless individuals.

Small deeds make a big difference. When we're overcome with fear, we should hold on ever more tightly to small good deeds. That is our inheritance. That is always the Jewish way to start and that will oftentimes make a big difference.

Elie Wiesel taught, "We can feel overwhelmed [...] And you can remain asleep to others' pain. We need to find a balance between sleep and paralysis. Start with one person. A person is not an abstraction – we must be *against* abstraction. Six million pairs of shoes taken from children in the camps are a statistic: one is a tragedy." (Ariel Burger, *Witness*, pp. 175-176)

Third, an inheritance of radical and transformational faith. This year, we must hold on to the belief that God will help us make the ultimate difference in this world.

As many of you know, and as I have shared previously, I was named for my great-grandfather, Yona Weiner z"l. Before the break of World War I, Yona was the town's philanthropist. According to family members, each Friday morning Yona would donate food to the town's needy, drawing no distinction between Jew and gentile.

When the Nazis invaded Yona's shtetel in Northern Romania, at some point a Nazi held a pistol to Yona's head, threatening to murder him. One of the town's gentiles, a good and brave man, intervened and swore in the name of God that Yona was a gentile. Yona's life was saved and I stand here today due to this very story.

Yes, Yona's spirit of generosity, and yes, the gentile man's spirit of shared humanity and his sheer bravery, and yes, God's timing – that this Nazi (*yimach shemo ve'zichro*), and my great-grandfather (z"l), and this brave gentile man (zt"l) all found themselves at that spot, at that time.

As Yona's great-grandson I have faith in God.

As importantly, as a grandson of Shoah survivors on my father's side and refugees of the Arab world on my mother's side, who was born in Israel, more than a decade after my own grandfather, a slave in a Nazi forced labor camp in Romania who fought in the Six Day War, I have faith in God. The founding of the State of Israel alone teaches us that drastic change can happen in the blink of an eye.

In truth, if each of us closely examined our own life, we would discover moments of great change and transformation that occurred to us with the blink of an eye and changed the course of our life forever. The right person...the right place...the right time.

Rav Menachem Froman, of blessed memory, an idiosyncratic and eccentric modern rebbe in Israel, once offered this thought about faith, "For my grandmother, God was an old grandfather with a white beard that looked upon us from heaven. The philosophers mock this grandmother's God. They worked tirelessly to turn God into a profound and abstract concept. But our commitment must be to give renewed depth to this grandmotherly faith for we 'await God's salvation' [at all time]." (R. Menachem Froman, *Chasidim Tzochakim Mizeh*, p. 151)

During this time of year, we may feel despair about the future of Israel (whether we're on the right or on the left), we may feel despair about the future of Judaism in America (be it the rise of antisemitism, anti-Zionism, or the threat of assimilation), or about the future of America itself (as Republicans, Democrats or Independents).

At this time, our concerns might be more concrete, "How will my relative who is currently serving in Israel's army fare this year?" "Will I, as a member of the LGBTQ community, ever be fully embraced by the Orthodox community?" "Will my grandson be Jewish?" "Will my child's school be a target for a mass shooting?" "Will we respond to the climate change crisis before it's too late?"

This is the time to hold on to our inheritance and the faith of our ancestors. We may not have all the answers. In fact, we don't have all the answers. We may not hold the solution. And yet, our faith casts our eyes above for we "await God's salvation" all the time. We believe that whatever we can't take care of will ultimately be taken up by God.

In a few short moments, we will join together to hear the sounding of the shofar. The Machzor offers different and even conflicting descriptions of this blast. This year, I urge us to hold on to its sounds as reminders of our Jewish inheritance. In this blasting sound, may we hear a fearful alarm. In this blasting

sound, may we hear a call to action, a call to doing small and good deeds. In this blasting sound, may we also merit to hear the triumphant notes of salvation and ultimate redemption.

This year I ask each of you to hold on to the belief that it's all up to us.

And yet, even though it's all up to us, I urge us to hold on to the belief that small deeds can make a big difference.

And yet, as importantly, let us remember that even though small deeds can make a big difference, let us also hold on to the belief that God can still make the ultimate difference.

*Le'yeshuatcha kiviti Hashem – “For God's salvation I await” at all time.*

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