

The Kohen's Appearance & Cohen's Vision

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My paternal grandparents were Shoah survivors. But they never thought of themselves as Shoah survivors.

Until very recently, I remember feeling frustrated or disappointed with my paternal grandparents, Nono Marcel and Nona Gita, for never fully sharing their story of survival with me. I must admit that I never even really thought of them as Holocaust survivors. After all, the real survivors were those who went to the camps, had numbers tattooed on their arms, and witnessed unimaginable horrors. Such was not the fate of my grandparents. I don't recall them speaking of the Shoah in those terms either. They simply spoke of the war.

But they did share a few, key details.

Although my grandmother rarely spoke about the war, there was one story she did share. My grandmother, who came from a very wealthy family, had her parents' home in Romania confiscated by the Nazis. Their residence was repurposed as a Nazi headquarters in Northern Romania. From time to time, my grandmother would tell us how her mother, Batya—a strong, assertive, and beautiful woman—bravely returned to the house to smuggle out money, silver and gold coins hidden in the basement. These valuable resources allowed the family to relocate to Bucharest and survive until the end of the war.

But there was something my Nona never shared, which I later learned from one of my great-uncles. My Nona's father, Yona—after whom I was named—lost all his wealth when the Nazis seized their home. Although he and his family miraculously survived, he withdrew deeply into himself after that, perhaps even becoming depressed, and was never able to reclaim his role as the head of the family, both during and after the war.

My Nona chose, deliberately or unconsciously, to never include that part of the story.

Nono Marcel, my grandfather, spent the war in a labor camp in Romania. Before the war, he worked as an accountant for a paper company owned by a righteous gentile, who somehow managed to smuggle money into the camp to support my Nono. My grandfather used these funds to secure a job in the camp's kitchen, which not only provided him with better access to food but also spared him from the grueling physical labor. My grandfather often mentioned how he "had it good" and how he was able to give larger portions to the infirm and injured inmates. That was about all he ever shared.

Years later, I met another survivor from the Romanian labor camp who painted a much darker picture, describing daily executions and random acts of abuse and violence inflicted on the prisoners. It was then that I came to realize the true extent of what my grandparents had endured.

Somehow, they were Shoah survivors and they didn't even know it.

As I already mentioned, for years, I felt confused by my grandparents' choice not to share more about their experiences during the Holocaust. But this summer, shortly after we learned about the brutal murder of Hersh Goldberg Polin, I had a revelation. I began to see and appreciate their choice in a new light. Whether deliberate or unconscious, my grandparents chose to focus on the light they found amid the darkness of their ordeal. And by doing so, they somehow managed to leave us a legacy of hope, optimism, and resilience.

How do we emerge from hell with images and stories that strengthen us, purify us, and perhaps even uplift and sanctify us?

I wish to evoke the image of my grandparents embracing life with remarkable vigor after enduring the unimaginable and utterly despicable. I envision my wife's grandparents, along with countless other survivors, choosing hope and optimism despite having witnessed the worst of humanity. Somehow, it is the image of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, that keeps coming back to me:

”מה נהדר היה כהן גדול בצאתו מבית קדשי הקדשים”

"How splendid was the High Priest when he emerged from the Holy of Holies."

My grandfather –

כְּדְמוּת הַקֶּשֶׁת בְּתוֹךְ הָעָנָן. מִרְאָה לַהֵן:

“Like the image of the rainbow amid the cloud, was the appearance of the Kohen Gadol.”

My grandmother –

כְּכּוֹכַב הַנֶּגֶה בְּגִבּוֹל מִזְרָח. מִרְאָה לַהֵן:

“Like the morning star on the eastern border, was the appearance of the Kohen Gadol.”

And those who like them, chose life and celebrated life –

כְּרֹאֵה זְרִיחַת שֶׁמֶשׁ עַל הָאָרֶץ. מִרְאָה לַהֵן:

“Like the sight of sunlight upon the earth, was the appearance of the Kohen Gadol.”

How do we emerge from this hell, from this past year, with images and stories that strengthen us, purify us, and perhaps even uplift and sanctify us? Like my grandparents...like the Kohen Gadol...

I feel a profound personal urgency regarding this question. During the shiva for my nephew Yoav, one of my children said to my wife, Frayda, “I’ve experienced so much trauma in my short life.” The child went on to explain, “First Covid, then Yonim died, and now Yoav.” Since then, our community has faced even more tragedies and traumas: Eyal Twito and Hersh Goldberg Polin, and too, too many others.

To my child, and to every child growing among us, I wish to say this: This year, as a community and as a people, we have ventured into the holy of holies of shock, grief, anger, and pain. Yet, each time, we have emerged with a renewed and deeper commitment to *chesed*—lovingkindness—strengthening the unbreakable bonds of our community, and holding steadfast to hope.

When we gathered just days after learning of Yoav’s death, or Eyal Twito’s, or Hersh Goldberg Polin’s murder, and the sanctuary was filled to capacity, standing room only, it was as if the space was “like the heavenly canopy stretched out over those who dwell above” –

כְּאֹהֶל הַנִּמְתַּח בְּדַרְי מַעֲלָה.

Indeed, it was like the appearance of the Kohen Gadol.

Countless other images come to mind, recalling the moment at the end of the Yom Kippur service in Temple times, when the scarlet thread turned white. This morning, I invite you to envision that scarlet thread turning white once again.

At the memorial our community held for Hersh Goldberg-Polin, Deb Fink collected letters of consolation for Jon and Rachel. She gathered these letters—hundreds of them—into a beautifully bound book. On its cover, the Hebrew words recited at a shiva house were inscribed with elegance:

”המקום ינחם אתכם”

“May the Omnipresent comfort you.”

Deb sent me an image of the book, and I immediately wrote back: “Remarkable.” In response, Deb wrote: “The messages inside are what is remarkable. Hundreds...several per page in most cases.”

The photo Deb sent me was just splendid, splendid as “the High Priest when he emerged from the Holy of Holies.”

Just a few days later, I received another photo from our dear friend in Jerusalem, Ari Applbaum. Ari’s wife, Rabba Naama Levitz Applbaum, is one of the leaders of the community attended by Jon and Rachel. We had heard that Naama, along with a select few, was coordinating everything related to Hersh’s shiva. My dear wife, Frayda, who understands the challenges of being a clergy family during difficult times, sent an elaborate meal to the Levitz Applbaum family. In her modest way, Frayda simply wrote, “Sending hugs—hope you are finding some space to breathe.”

In the next exchange Ari wrote: “Naama spent 14 hours at the [shiva] tent today and I was able to surprise her with this when she came home thanks to you.” It was an image of their family’s dinner.

I imagined seeing Rabba Naama entering the home, splendid like “the High Priest when he emerged from the Holy of Holies.” The food on the table, too, was as splendid as “the High Priest when he emerged from the Holy of Holies.”

When one of our members served reserve duty in Gaza for three months at the start of the war, and our community continued to provide meals for his family, day in and day out, that was also as splendid as “the High Priest when he emerged from the Holy of Holies.”

Another dear friend in Israel, Maayan Rabinovich, who years ago served as our shul’s educational director, visited the parents of Noa Argamani, a few times a month since the start of the war. Some of you may recall that Liora Argamani, Noa’s mom, had terminal cancer, and so Maayan visited her at the hospital, giving the family strength, comforting them. Just a few days after Noa was released in a most heroic and daring military operation, Maayan shared a photo of her and Noa together. Sisters of *chesed*, of love and mercy.

Noa, emerging alive from Gaza, was “like the garden’s rose among the thorns” –

כְּשׁוֹשְׁנֵת גֶן בֵּין הַחוֹחִים.

Maayan, visiting the hospital on a regular basis was “like an angel standing at the end of the path” –

כְּמַלְאָךְ הַנֹּצֵב עַל רֹאשׁ דְּרָךְ.

I hold on to these splendid images, like “the High Priest when he emerged from the Holy of Holies.”

Indeed, when our Beth Israel and Beth Jacob members, who joined our mission trip, visited the Shiba Rehabilitation Center in Israel, and paid our respects to bereaved families as well, we were like “the ones dressed in the mantle of and armor of righteousness” –

כְּלְבוּשׁ מְעִיל וְכְשָׂרְיוֹן צְדָקָה.

A member of this very group asked to meet with my parents on their recent visit to Berkeley, over a month ago. He explained that he had a gift for them. My father recalled that he was a bit taken back by this request, “What kind of gift do you give someone who had lost their grandchild?”

When he finally met with my parents at our home, here in Berkeley, this person explained that the visit to Yoav’s gravesite was incredibly powerful and transformative, more than anything he had experienced on the entire trip. Yoav’s last words deeply resonated with him, he went on to explain.

And then he presented my parents with Canadian silver coins. Canadian, because of my sister's and my parents' journey from Israel to Canada, and back to Israel again. Silver coins, because those would be needed one day for *Beit HaMikdash*, for the Holy Temple.

He told my parents, "Maybe you will merit to see it being rebuilt, so here are the coins. But if you don't, please pass them to your grandchildren, as maybe they will merit to see it being rebuilt. But if they don't, please ask them to pass it on to future generations, as maybe they will merit to see it being rebuilt."

What kind of gift do you give someone who had lost their grandchild? You give them love, you try to give them ongoing support. And also, you give them hope. Hope that their children, and children's children, grow up in a transformed world.

Those coins shine like the coins my great-grandmother, Batya, smuggled out of her home in northern Romania, so many years ago, defying all odds, insisting on a different tomorrow.

And those coins shine splendidly like "the High Priest when he emerged from the Holy of Holies."

Immediately after the conclusion of the liturgical song, *Mareeh Kohen*, we abruptly say these words: "All this was while the Sanctuary stood on its foundations, and the holy Temple on its base; when the High Priest stood and served, and all his generation looked on and were joyful. How fortunate was the eye that beheld all this; when our ears hear of it, our souls languish indeed."

But to you I say, despite all our grief, despite all our pain:

How fortunate was the eye that witnessed our tent of *chesed* and loving kindness.

How fortunate was the eye that witnessed our strength.

How fortunate was the eye that beheld our congregation of holy ones.

How fortunate was the eye that witnessed the constant sacrifices being offered.

Indeed, how fortunate was the eye that witnessed the whitening of the crimson thread.

אמת, מה נהדר היה כהן גדול בצאתו מבית קדשי הקדשים

"Indeed, how splendid was the High Priest when he emerged from the Holy of Holies."