

Be'eri: this is one of the most common names that has been given to new babies born in Israel over the past twelve months, and a name that was quite rare and unusual before then. Be'eri, you may remember, is the name of the kibbutz right next to Gaza that was one of the places hardest hit by Hamas' brutal attack of October 7; more than one hundred members of Kibbutz Be'eri were butchered that day, and thirty percent of the residents were either murdered or seized and taken to Gaza as hostages. Giving new babies the name Be'eri is of course a way of memorializing the massacre that was perpetrated and honoring the memories of those who were killed, but it is also a statement of hope and resilience. The Hebrew word 'be'er' means 'well' and 'be'eri' means 'my well.' *Be'er* is a recurring word in the Torah, which repeatedly portrays wells as sources of life in an inhospitable desert. On Rosh ha-Shanah we read the story of Hagar and Ishmael, cast away from Abraham's camp at Sarah's instigation, running out of water under the burning desert sun and feeling all hope was lost until God opens Hagar's eyes and shows her a "*be'er mayim*," a well of water from which she can sustain herself. A well is also where Abraham's servant meets Isaac's bride-to-be Rebecca, where Jacob meets his beloved Rachel and where Moses meets his future wife Tzipora. Wells are sources of life, and giving a new baby the name Be'eri in the aftermath of October 7 is a radical, almost subversive act of hope in the face of the deadliest day the Jewish people have experienced since the Holocaust.

Hope is a difficult and demanding thing. It animates us, keeps us going in the face of long and even seemingly impossible odds and enables us to create realities that seem otherwise unattainable. But it also hurts so much, because it keeps us holding onto a yearned-for possibility, keeps a wound raw and fresh, rather than allowing it to scar over and to dull the pain that can come with the renunciation of hope. We all saw it on the faces of Jonathan Polin and Rachel Goldberg-Polin – parents of Hersh Goldberg-Polin of blessed memory, whose arm was blown off by a Hamas grenade as he was trying to protect other attendees of the Nova music festival who were sheltering with him; who was dragged back into the darkness of the tunnels below Gaza, but who didn't give up hope for one moment for their precious son's safe return for 330 long, wrenching days as he was held in unimaginable and heartbreaking circumstances.

You saw the hope and determination etched on their faces when they spoke at the rally in Washington DC in November which many of us attended, when they spoke to Jewish groups around the world trying to rally support for the hostages and a deal that would bring them back to their families, and most recently when they spoke at a national political convention and began their remarks by telling their son how much they loved him. How does one hold on to the kind of hope that they did, for as long as they did? How does one remain open to the piercing pain of daring to imagine your child will be returned to you and not allowing it to fester into anger and bitterness and despair and all the emotions it would be so, so natural to feel?

What has been true for Jonathan and Rachel Goldberg-Polin has been experienced literally hundreds of times over during the past twelve months, with the families of those whose loved ones were seized and taken to Gaza and have been anxiously awaiting news, demanding their government do more to bring their loved ones back. There have been the rare, exhilarating moments of triumphant disbelief such as when hostages Noa Argamani, Almog Meir Jan, Andrei Kozlov and Shlomi Ziv were rescued in June in a daring raid by Israeli special

forces, or when Farhan al-Qadi, a member of Israel's Bedouin community, was similarly rescued in August.

But all too often the news has either been tragic – like Carmel Gat, Alexander Lobanov, Almog Sarusi, Eden Yerushalmi, and Ori Danino – shining young souls who, along with Hersh, were murdered point-blank by their captors; or else unavailable, as with the fates of the more than one hundred hostages still being held by Hamas whose families don't even know if their loved ones are alive or dead, let alone if they will ever see them again. It is an intolerable, unimaginable situation.

Part of the reason I think that the plight of the hostages moves us so deeply is because of the sheer, naked vulnerability – the utter and complete helplessness – of those who are being held – pawns in a cruel calculus of power whose captors, as has been made abundantly clear, have absolute impunity to do to them whatever they wish. And when just moments before Hamas appeared, these people were just living their lives with no expectation of anything out of the ordinary. It's the fact that everything was going normally, just like us right now, that makes a nightmare like this simultaneously inconceivable and horribly, obscenely easy to imagine – of normalcy being abruptly and irrevocably snatched away in an instant and plummeting into an abyss from which it feels like there's no way out.

The Talmud (B. Bava Batra 8b) lists a number of ways in which those beset by their foes could perish, including by sword, by famine, and by captivity. R. Yochanan says each fate listed is worse than the one that precedes it, with captivity being worst of all because it includes all the other forms of suffering. The Talmud, it turns out, has quite a lot to say about captivity, as it was tragically common in ancient and even more recent times for Jews to be taken hostage and held for ransom – in part because they frequently traveled through territories controlled by other peoples and in part because their captors knew the community would pay up to bring one of their own back home. The Talmud extensively discusses communal taxes assessed for the mitzvah of *pidyon shevu'im* – the redeeming of captives. It imposes limits that should be placed on how much ransom should be paid, because of the awareness that paying too high a price could incentivize future acts of abduction and would lead to yet more suffering.

But immediately after this clear statement placing a limit on the amount that can be paid to redeem a captive, the Talmud asks if it's permitted for an individual to pay an exorbitant ransom if he's wealthy enough that he can afford it from his personal funds, without placing an undue burden on the community. Profoundly, the Talmud supplies no answer to this question *even though* it has just unequivocally stated that it's forbidden to pay too high a price. This makes no sense: According to simple logic, the answer should be evident: having the wealthy individual pay the higher price is forbidden, because even though he's assuming the cost himself, his payment still makes hostage-taking so lucrative that it could lead to more victims. So why doesn't the Talmud just supply what should be an obvious response? The answer, I believe, is precisely that the situation of a loved one snatched away and held hostage can't be constrained by or described within logic, defies any kind of sense: the terror, the desperation, the anguish of a family member who more than anything wants – *needs* – to get their loved one back, and knows it might be possible: how could you, how could I, how could even God tell this person that the means exist to get their loved one back but they can't make use of them?

It's unthinkable, it's all unthinkable. And this is why Israeli society has been in such turmoil for the past twelve months. And this is why Israel has a history of paying such a high

price for the return of hostages. Like when a temporary ceasefire was negotiated in late November, Israel exchanged three Palestinian prisoners for every captive Hamas returned. It's why Israel exchanged five terrorists in 2006 to obtain the *remains*, of two Israeli soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, both captured in Lebanon and held by Hezbollah. Or why when Gilad Shalit – the, *until now*, most famous hostage in Israeli history, who was captured by Hamas militants in a cross-border raid in 2006 and held in Gaza for more than five years – was finally released, it involved exchanging 1,027 Palestinian prisoners to obtain his freedom – a price Israel was ultimately willing to pay to bring him home.

The whole situation is so tragic, and feels so hopeless. And that's exactly why the hope of parents like Jonathan and Rachel Goldberg-Polin seems so defiant, and so courageous. We saw it even as they spoke so heartbreakingly at their son's funeral – a refusal to succumb to the hatred and evil that had claimed their son. *Knowing their son was murdered in the cruelest way imaginable they refused to give up on hope.* And so Jonathan said: "For 330 days, mom and I sought the proverbial stone that we could turn over to save you. Maybe, just maybe, your death is the stone that will bring home the remaining 101 hostages." Hope. And Rachel said: "Part of what is so deeply crushing and confusing for us is that a strange thing happened along this macabre path upon which our family found itself traveling [all these past] days. Amidst the inexplicable agony, terror, anguish, desperation and fear...we became absolutely CERTAIN, that you were coming home to us ALIVE." Hope. And she added: "I beg of you, Hersh, please do what you can do to have your life shine down on the whole family. Help shower us with healing and resilience. Help us to rise again. I pray that your death will be a turning point in this horrible situation we are in." Hope.

*Mi k'amcha Yisrael*, our liturgy asks – who is like Your people Israel? Who could take their pain and grief and hold out hope that God might yet make something beautiful and providential out of it? Who could rise above the hate and cruelty that defined those who snatched away their son and then snuffed out his young life, not allow their souls to be poisoned and disfigured by the evil which had become their reality? And how can we, gathered here on Yom Kippur, quaking with righteous anger at the outrage being perpetrated against Israel by Hamas, how can we gather strength and inspiration and, yes, hope from Jonathan and Rachel and the other families who refuse to give into hate, who refuse to become the very people whose twisted ideologies legitimize destroying others and celebrates their suffering? How can we, dare I say it, use the forgiveness and atonement that is at the heart of this holiest of days to let go of a portion of our justifiable anger and rage and chart a course that upholds the values of life and peace and understanding in a world that seems determined at every turn to destroy all of those ideals?

Somehow, we need to find the strength and courage not to allow ourselves to become like those who feed off hate and cruelty. Somehow we need to plumb those wells of hope – *be'erim* – that Hersh's parents so lovingly created and tended and turn them into *be'ereinu*: our wells, a collective source of strength and hope that allows all of us to draw from and be sustained by their life-giving waters. Somehow we need to rise above, to follow the example of Rachel and Jonathan, not to allow our own souls to become twisted and distorted, not to lash out with violence and hate but to respond with hope, and perhaps with prayer.

And such a prayer – a prayer for those who are still being held captive under inhuman and unimaginable circumstances exists – is in fact a very ancient part of Jewish liturgy. The fact

that our liturgy contains such a prayer should be equally horrifying and unsurprising, given the history and the Talmudic sources I shared. It is a prayer that we have been singing at every Friday evening and every Shabbat morning service since shortly after October 7; and so may be familiar to you.

The prayer begins: “*Acheinu* – literally, our brothers – *kol beit Yisrael*, the whole house, the whole family of Israel.” Starting with the word “*acheinu*, our brothers” – twisting the Hebrew syntax to put this word first – underscores the way the hostages’ *loved ones* put them first, and invites us into the families’ urgency and distress and the way their lives have been twisted up, the way their loved ones are the first thing they think of when they get up in the morning and the last thing they think of before they go to bed. The phrase ‘the whole house of Israel’ also emphasizes the ways we are all interconnected, the way our fates are bound together and what happens to Jews on the far side of the world affects us here, now in our day as it did at the time this prayer was written. And it’s worth pointing out that while most of the hostages are Jewish, there are also Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and, yes, Muslims who are being held by Hamas. All of them were seized because they were in Israel on October 7 and were therefore judged ‘legitimate’ targets. Their fates are deeply woven into the fates of all the other hostages that Israel is trying to get back and so they too are considered members of the house of Israel and are included in our prayer.

The prayer continues: “*Ha-netunim b’tzarah uv’shivyah* – those who are in the grip of distress or are being held in captivity; *ha-omdim ben ba-yam uvein ba-yabashah* – whether they are on the sea or dry land” – or in our tragic case *under* the land in tunnels beneath Gaza.

The prayer continues: “*Ha-Makom*.” This is one of the ways Jewish tradition refers to God and literally means “the Place,” which is why I’ve translated it as “the Omnipresent One.” What it means theologically to refer to God as “the Place” is itself remarkable, and would take a whole other sermon to explore; but I believe using that term in this prayer reinforces the notion that no place is devoid of God, that however alone and scared and isolated the captives may feel, they are not alone, God is still with them. And so: “*Ha-Makom yerachem aleihem* – may God have mercy upon them; *v’yotziyem m’tzarah livvachah* – may God bring them out from *tzarah*, suffering and constriction to *revachah*, a place that is free and open, which I have translated as “expansive relief.” “*M’afelah l’orah*” – from the inky black darkness – both literal and spiritual – in which they are being held, not only to light, but to hope and strength as well. From the blackness of the tunnels far from the sun, to the light of their families’ love. “*M’shibud l’ge’ulah* – from subjugation to redemption.” And then it concludes with the traditional Aramaic phrase “*hashta uvagala uvizman kariv* – now, speedily, and in our days.”

The setting for this prayer – which you can find on the back of your booklets – was composed by Israeli songwriter Abie Rotenberg in the late 1980’s in response to the First Intifada and has become the near universal melody for this ancient prayer. Since October 7, it has been sung in synagogues around Israel and across the world and I urge us all to join in fully – if you know the words, please sing them out, don’t just listen – pouring our longing, our fears, our heartbreak and, yes, our hopes on this Yom Kippur into these words: a prayer for restoration, for peace, for return: for the hostages being held in Gaza, for our own humanity, and for our broken world.