

Light after Darkness

FROM THE KIKAYON TO COVID



Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

As the world attempts to come to terms with the countless challenges presented by the Coronavirus pandemic, the word ‘resilience’ has gained new popularity in the global lexicon. Yet, the term is inadequate as a response to adversity.

‘Resilience’ comes from the Latin, meaning to recoil or rebound. It implies that, over time, we can return to where we started. But, as any Shoah survivor will attest, real adversity cannot merely be shrugged off. It remains a part of you for the rest of your life.



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The Israeli psychologist and Nobel Laureate, Professor Daniel Kahneman, points out that negative experiences loom larger and feel more intense than positive experiences. However, he maintains that it is possible to train ourselves to take better control of how our minds process these happenings. We can derive inspiration from the Torah account of creation: “And there was evening and there was morning” (Bereishit 1:5). Morning always follows evening; darkness always gives way to light. Recognition of the fact that adversity will always be followed by

deliverance helps us withstand hardship and see that, just as there is a certainty about night and day, adversity can be an unavoidable and necessary part of what it is to be human.

Our *Yamim Noraim* Torah readings reflect this outlook. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read the dramatic account of how Hagar and Yishmael, cast into a barren wilderness, drank their last drops of water and feared the worst. Hagar placed her child behind a bush, not wishing to see him die. But, at that moment of profound personal anguish, an Angel of Hashem appeared to her and said, “Do not be afraid, Hashem has heard the boy crying” (Bereishit 21:17). Hashem then opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.

Similarly, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we read how Avraham Avinu was about to do the unthinkable, to sacrifice his child in service of Hashem. Yet again, at the most critical moment, an Angel called out to Avraham, “Do not reach out your hand against the boy” (Bereishit 22:12).

On Yom Kippur, we read that when the *kikayon* plant, under which Yonah had been sheltering from the desert sun, was destroyed, his suffering was so great that he begged for death. From here Hashem taught Yonah a lesson – if he could grieve so profoundly over a plant, how much more precious were the lives of the inhabitants of Nineveh!

All of these examples have something striking in common – their cause and effect.

Hagar and Yishmael were cast away because Hashem instructed Avraham to heed the concerns of Sarah. Yet, Hashem then promised that “a great nation” would be descended from Yishmael.

The Akeida was a direct commandment from Hashem. Yet, He then made His timeless covenant with Avraham, saying, “I will greatly bless you and greatly multiply your descendants” (Bereishit 22:17).

Hashem destroyed the *kikayon*. But He then used Yonah’s experience to teach us one of the most fundamental principles of Judaism – that all life is sacred.

While our tradition, therefore, justifiably encourages positivity amid adversity, the Rambam goes one step further. He observes that “the transition from trouble to ease gives more pleasure than continual ease” (Moreh Nevuchim 3:24). This is a challenging concept, particularly for those who have experienced great pain and suffering. Yet, the Rambam goes on to point out that “the Israelites would not have been able to conquer the land and prevail over its inhabitants if they had not previously undergone the vicissitudes of their travails in the wilderness.”

Often, quite remarkably, it is in encountering significant challenges that people reach the most extraordinary levels of human achievement. Hashem has taught us repeatedly throughout our history, and reinforces very powerfully for us over the *Yamim Noraim*, that adversity is temporary. Eventually, the darkness will give way to the light and when it does so, we can emerge strengthened by the trust that we have placed in Him.

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