

"Hersh, Hersh! It's mama! Hersh, I love you!"

Those were the words Rachel Goldberg-Polin cried through the loudspeakers at the border of Gaza on Day 328 of captivity. She called to Hersh, hoping he could hear her loving and determined voice. Perhaps he could hear her and take comfort in the tireless efforts of his parents, Rachel and Jon, and the efforts of so many to bring him home.

Many of us imagined the day when Hersh would return to embrace his parents. Through their tears, they would reunite physically and spiritually, voicing their love and longing after his days in terrifying captivity. And we envisioned that he would hug them with one hand.

On October 7th, grenade after grenade was thrown at where Hersh and others were hiding from the monstrous Hamas terrorists at the Nova Music Festival. One of the grenades blew off his arm just below the elbow before the terrorists abducted him and held him hostage for over ten months.

As much as we prayed for Hersh's safe return, that day would not come. Every morning, I awoke, and the first thing I would do was open the Israeli news app on my phone, praying to read that Hersh and the other hostages would be home. After hundreds of days locked away, they would feel the love and care of their families while being welcomed with incredible *ruach* by the people of Israel. They would again taste freedom and the air and spirit of *Ha'aretz*, the Land of Israel.

The Hamas terrorists brutally executed Hersh and five other hostages, Eden Yerushalmi, Carmel Gat, Almog Sarusi, Alex Lobanov, and Ori Danino. For them, too, there would be tears of incredible sadness for their deaths instead of tears of joy for their return.

As I said in my message to the community last Sunday, we are heartbroken.

We feel similar to what the prophet Jeremiah cried out:

מִי־יֵתֵן רֹאשִׁי מַיִם וְעֵינַי מְקוֹר דְּמָעָה וְאֶבְרָכָה יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה אֵת חֲלָלֵי בֵּת־עַמִּי.

Oh, that my head were water  
My eyes a fount of tears!  
Then would I weep day and night  
For the slain of my poor people.<sup>1</sup>

So many watched Hersh's funeral in person and online. With tears streaming down our faces, we witnessed a mother with profound determination, and boundless love mourn her cherished gift, her son. We watched a mother who fought with every fiber of her being for the hostages' safe return teach the world about unceasing love. A love that the ties of life could never bind. A love that we will live on forever.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 8:23

Hersh's home congregation will study rabbinic text to honor Hersh's memory. Given the depth of Torah with which Hersh's family has taught the world, I thought it fitting for this morning to teach classical rabbinic texts in Hersh's memory that can hopefully guide our conversations and thoughts about this heartwrenching loss.

In her eulogy for Hersh, Rachel said: "Out of all the mothers in the world, God chose to give Hersh to me."

This enduring feeling is grounded in appreciation for a child and can also be found in our textual tradition. For example, in the Talmud, the sages teach:

**There are three partners in the forming of a person: The Holy One, Blessed be God, who provides the soul, and their father and his mother (parents).** When a person honors their parents, the Holy One, Blessed be God, says: I ascribe credit to them as if I dwelt between them, and they honor Me as well.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Rachel taught parents and children alike the importance of building a solid foundational relationship. Not only because it is essential for successful familial relationships but also because it is a sacred task. We should consider our children the blessings for which they are. Hopefully, our children will acknowledge their role in establishing that love and care with respect; it brings holiness beyond anything else in life to the world.

I often tell my children, "I am so lucky to be your abba." Hersh's mama reminded us just how true that is.

When Rachel stood at the border of Gaza, before Hersh was murdered, she said through the speakers that she shared the Kohanic blessing toward Hersh in Gaza every morning and Shabbat evening. Stretching her hands in the air, she would recite the words that have accompanied our people for thousands of years:

May God bless you and protect you!  
May God make God's face shine upon you and deal graciously with you!  
May God bestow [divine] favor upon you and grant you peace!<sup>3</sup>

We recite these blessings every Shabbat over our children, under the huppah at our wedding ceremonies, and toward the congregation in the repetition of the Amidah prayer. They are aspirational and descriptive of the life we seek at our most uplifting moments, our week, and our lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Kiddushin 30b:21

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 6:23-26

These blessings Rachel extended in her rawest moments are a parent's gift to our children and the world.

Toward the end of her eulogy, Rachel shared, "As we transform our hope into grief and this new unknown brand of pain, I beg of you, please do what you can to have your light shine down on me."

This concept of light in each person can be found in many sources in our tradition, from the light that emanated from Adam and Eve when they left the Garden of Eden to the light that emanated from Moses when he returned to the Israelites after his time with God on Mount Sinai. In the light of Moses, we can find inspiring insight into the nature of humanity.

In the rabbinic work 'Spiritual Light' by Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman, he writes:

"The light seen emanating from the truly elevated, pious and pure individuals, like polished, precious, translucent gems, is actually His (God's) light shining through them from the "other side". And His (God's) Light projected through them is via the Divine soul, as in the verse, "Man's soul is the candle of G-d" (Prov. 20:27). Thus, their soul is actually His (God's) flame, His (God's) light."<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the light of the truly righteous is not just a metaphor but an actual emanation of the Divine. The light of the six hostages, these innocent souls murdered in cold blood by what President Herzog rightly called "depraved barbarians," will shine for all eternity.

We prayed that we would never have to share these traditional words of comfort for the hostages, but here we are, and we ought to for the care and support of Eden, Carmel, Almog, Alex, Ori, and Hersh's families.

May God comfort their families as God comforts all of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

May the memory of the righteous be an eternal blessing.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://ohr.edu/explore\\_judaism/ask\\_the\\_rabbi/ask\\_the\\_rabbi/8007](https://ohr.edu/explore_judaism/ask_the_rabbi/ask_the_rabbi/8007)