



The Resilience to Rebuild, Reconsecrate, and Rededicate

R. Avi Strausberg – strausberg@hadar.org

Hanukkah 5782

Many of us are familiar with the story of Hanukkah found in the Talmud Bavli. This is the story of the miraculous oil that burned for eight days, a narrative which lifts up God's role in this miracle that defies nature. But one which is generally less well known, the story told by the Scholion to Megilat Ta'anit,¹ is one that focuses on human resilience instead of divine agency.

After the Greek army, led by Antiochus, set out to quash the Jewish rebellion and eliminate Jewish practice, the much smaller guerilla army of the Maccabees managed to mount a resistance and triumph over this much more powerful force. With the Beit Ha-Mikdash desecrated and its vessels made impure, the Hasmoneans began to rebuild. The Scholion teaches us that, upon reentering the Temple, the Hasmoneans cleansed the Sanctuary. They fixed the altar, but, having no proper *menorah* at hand to light, they constructed a new one from what they had, refashioning the very same military spears that helped them defeat the

¹ Megilat Ta'anit is an ancient list of dates on which one is forbidden to fast or to have funerals or both. It probably comes from the Second Temple period, and was written in Aramaic. It is mentioned in the Mishnah (e.g. Ta'anit 2:8), and occasionally quoted directly (e.g. the Bavli's version of the Hanukkah story on Shabbat 21b opens with a short quotation from Megilat Ta'anit). The Scholion is a sort of Hebrew commentary on the earlier Aramaic core, which explains the reason that each date has the rule that it does. There are a bunch of different versions of the Scholion, and estimates to its dating vary. The expert on Megilat Ta'anit and the Scholion is Vered Noam, who produced the modern critical edition.



Greek army into objects fit for divine service.² This process of reclaiming the Sanctuary and fixing the vessels lasted for eight days, and it is these eight days—eight days that mark human ingenuity and resilience—that we commemorate when we celebrate Hanukkah.

For the past year, I have had the blessing of 20th century Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira as my steady companion, through his work, the Eish Kodesh. Writing from the Warsaw Ghetto at a time of deepest despair, the fact that the Eish Kodesh even exists as a work of creative Torah is in itself a testament to the resilience of its author. However, beyond its very existence serving as a testament to resilience, its many *derashot* offer varied and rich thoughts on the themes of resilience and what it means to find hope, courage, and faith during times of darkness. In the spirit of embracing a narrative of Hanukkah that lifts up human agency and resilience, I want to turn to the *derashot* of the Eish Kodesh for Rabbi Shapira's rich Torah on human perseverance in times of calamity.

But before we can dive into Rabbi Shapira's writings on the danger and necessity of hope and the role of community and compassion in suffering, we have to start with his *derashah* on Parashat Hayyei Sarah, in which he teaches that sometimes it's inappropriate to speak of resilience. Some suffering is too great, too impossible to withstand.³ Immediately after Isaac is nearly sacrificed by his own father, the Torah marks Sarah's death. Rabbi Shapira teaches that the reason why Sarah's death immediately follows the binding of Isaac is to advocate on our behalf, appealing to God that "if the anguish is, God forbid, unbearable, then death can result." If even Sarah, our mother, who, according to a *midrash* (Bereishit Rabbah 58:1), was righteous all of the days of her life, couldn't withstand such suffering, all the more so we ordinary individuals sometimes face suffering that, through no fault of our own, cannot be withstood. Rabbi Shapira argues that Sarah dies on our behalf, not only to advocate that

² Oxford Manuscript, in Noam's edition, p. 266.

³ Eish Kodesh, Parashat Hayyei Sarah, 1939.



some suffering is too great to bear, but also to teach us that one's ability to be resilient does not necessarily depend on one's own goodness or strength.

Often, in our culture today, there are narratives around survival and recovery that praise those who are resilient, and implicitly—or perhaps even explicitly—place blame on those who are seen as less “resilient.” Rabbi Shapira, through Sarah's death, teaches us that sometimes there can be no recovery. If Isaac's near-sacrifice could break Sarah, then our own hardship can break us. There can be no shame or guilt in that.

And yet, at the same time that Rabbi Shapira teaches this powerful lesson, he also offers a new understanding of what it means for the Jewish people to be stiff-necked. Many times in the Torah, God describes the grumbling Israelites as “stiff-necked,” utilizing this description as a critique meant to characterize our stubbornness and refusal to show gratitude to God.⁴ However, Rabbi Shapira suggests that this same stiff-neckedness is the very source of our ability to serve God.⁵ He teaches that one of the fundamental differences between angels and human beings is that, when angels spend time in our world, they need to go through a purification process before they can return to God. Human beings, in contrast, are able to worship God in this world, even bringing God down amongst us through our prayers and service.

Rabbi Shapira writes, “While angels are altered by contact with the world, the Jew remains unaffected; he⁶ resists change.” The Jew, unlike the angel, is “stiff-necked,” unchanged in his worship to God, and in this way is similar to God through this attribute of immutability. In the Book of Malachi (3:6), God says, “I am God. I have not changed.” So, too, Rabbi Shapira

⁴ E.g. Exodus 32:9.

⁵ Eish Kodesh, Parshat Noah, 1940.

⁶ Following Rabbi Shapira's use of gender in this *derashah*.



teaches, the Jew “remains unchanged by contact with the physical world... able to withstand all stress and pressures.” He continues, “Not only are we able to withstand any and all challenges, we are always, no matter what the external circumstances, capable of bringing God into this world. This is what it means to be stiff-necked and obstinate at the level of ‘I am God; I have not changed.’”

Rather than seeing our stubbornness as a character flaw that gets in the way of our worship of God, Rabbi Shapira understands it not only as a strength but, in fact, something that brings us closer to God and makes us more God-like. Like God, we are unchanged by the external forces of the world around us. Even when we are deep amidst suffering, when we are broken and crushed, at our core we are like God and we, like God, are unchanged. When taking this teaching hand-in-hand with his *derashah* from Hayyei Sarah, we encounter a nuanced understanding of resilience. On the one hand, Rabbi Shapira asserts that some suffering is too much and can break us beyond repair, through no fault of our own. At the same time, he boldly asserts a tenuous hope that, even despite this prospect of brokenness, there is a chance we can remain unchanged, our core intact and immutable.

Hope, for Rabbi Shapira, is both a danger and a necessity. Rabbi Shapira teaches, “a person needs to hope at every moment to be saved by God.”⁷ It is this hope and belief in salvation that sustains us, even when there is no path forward. In his *derashah* for Hanukkah in 1941, he writes, “Faith is the foundation of everything.” Without faith, we are torn from God and it is as if our soul is in Gehenna (Hell).⁸

But for Rabbi Shapira, hope isn’t everything. Hope can leave us passive, dependent upon an external force for salvation, on a timeline that is beyond our control. Rabbi Shapira quotes

⁷ Eish Kodesh, Parshat Zakhon, 1942.

⁸ Eish Kodesh, Hanukkah 1941.



Proverbs (13:12), “Expectation long deferred makes the heart sick,” and writes that when one’s hope is completely dependent upon immediate salvation, and then salvation doesn’t come, one’s whole being and welfare is liable to be crushed.⁹ When we are too hopeful—or rather when we are too hopeful for a particular outcome at a particular time—and that outcome doesn’t materialize, we are liable to fall far from where we started spiritually and emotionally. Hope sustains us, but too much hope (or a certain kind of hope) can be a dangerous thing.

The performance of *mitzvot*, however—taking action—gives us agency over our own lives, even in situations of powerlessness and hopelessness. Observing Torah and performing *mitzvot* is inherently good in and of itself.¹⁰ Rabbi Shapira writes, “with Torah and *mitzvot*, good does not come only by way of reward, but happens intrinsically.” When we perform *mitzvot*, both those that connect us to God and those that connect us to other people, we manifest goodness in this world.

Rabbi Shapira sees a special power specifically in those *mitzvot* that connect us to other people. The way to arouse God’s compassion for us is to have compassion for each other. Sometimes, we can be so immersed in our own suffering—or perhaps the suffering around us is so great, so incessant—that we inevitably become dull to the pain of others. We stop seeing and noticing each other. We stop caring. Rabbi Shapira writes that we must fight this tendency and instead, when faced with another’s despair, “our heart must all but dissolve, God forbid, from the bitter pain.”¹¹ When we have compassion for others, we not only strengthen the power of our own prayers, and thereby increase their efficacy, we draw down compassion and salvation from above. Our compassion stirs God’s compassion; our actions

⁹ Eish Kodesh, Parshat Zakhor, 1942.

¹⁰ Eish Kodesh, Parashat Mishpatim, 1942.

¹¹ Eish Kodesh, Parashat Hukat, 1941.



move God to action.¹² Through the tangible manifestation of our actions as we care for one another, we create a conduit through which God's salvation can flow.

The Hanukkah story, much like the Torah of Rabbi Shapira, is one in which divine salvation and human resilience go hand-in-hand. The narrative of the miraculous oil that burns for eight days is nearly inseparable from the miracle of the military victory fought by the Maccabees, as well as the resilience of the Hasmoneans to repair the Temple after it had been desecrated. So, too, with Rabbi Shapira's Torah, belief in God's salvation and human perseverance are deeply intertwined. Rabbi Shapira teaches us that, without faith in God and hope in God's salvation, we are lost; there is no option but to stay the path of Jewish observance and belief. And yet, his Torah is also one that lifts up human agency. We are not passive spectators in our religious lives and in our salvation. Rather, even as we wait and hope for God, we insist that we can manifest salvation ourselves. If salvation tarries, we will speed it up through our prayers, through our *mitzvot*, and through our compassion for one another.

As we turn again to the Hanukkah story this year, I invite us to bring in the Torah of Rabbi Shapira, a Torah that lifts up reclaiming power in periods of powerlessness, and hope in moments of hopelessness. May we ourselves see a time when divine agency and human agency weave together into one story in which the miraculous is manifest and salvation is near.

¹² This is also the message of the third perek of Bavli Ta'anit. See Devora Steinmetz, "Perception, Compassion, and Surprise: Literary Coherence in the Third Chapter of Bavli Ta'anit," *HUC Annual* 82-83 (2011-2012), pp. 61-117.

