



Parshat Ki Tetze
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Hope Lost and Found
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You don't have to be a tennis fan to root for Roger Federer at this weekend's US Open. The Roger Federer story is about so much more than tennis.

For those who are not tennis fans, Roger Federer is reckoned by most experts as the single greatest tennis player ever. He has won more Grand Slam singles titles, 17, than any player ever. He held the no. 1 ranking from 2004 to 2008, the longest sustained period of dominance, ever. He has earned more prize money—over 84 million dollars—than any tennis player, ever.

And then, one day, Federer the invincible suddenly lost his invincibility. He started losing to ordinary players. Instead of winning Grand Slam tournaments, he was exiting early. A new star was born named Rafael Nadal, who would beat Federer consistently. Commentators who once opined that Federer was the best tennis player ever now urged him to retire so that the world would remember him the way he used to be.

He tried to resist his demise to no avail. He changed coaches. But he still kept losing. He tweaked his various strokes. But he still kept losing. It seemed his best days were behind him, and that he could no longer do what he had always done.

He still kept losing. But he also still kept working. He still kept striving. He did not give up. He did not give in. This persistence—together with the fact that Rafael Nadal is injured—have now allowed Federer to be back, late in the US Open, still competing to win another Grand Slam event.

I can no longer do what I used to do. I no longer am the person I used to be.

That's where this becomes not a tennis story, but a human story. How often does our life change—we lose something we once had—and with it we lose hope that we will ever rediscover what we once had, and the joy that went with it.

My child is really struggling. You're only as happy as your least happy child. I will never know happiness again.

My health is flagging. I can't imagine ever feeling healthy again.

I lost my job. I am worried about money. I can't imagine ever having a good job and financial security again.

My loved one passed away. They won't be at our Rosh Hashanah table. I will never laugh again.

In crises like this, some part of us really believes that we will never know joy again. Rabbi Harold Kushner quotes Kahlil Gibran, "you will turn your back on the sun, and the sun will become for you nothing more than a caster of shadows."

This dark place, the sun as nothing more than a caster of shadows, can and does happen to us individually. It also is very much happening to us collectively right now.

Our own country, our beloved Israel, our whole world, feel like we are in this very dark patch where we wonder whether we will ever know light and joy again. This has been a *summer* of heartbreak. This has been a *week* of heartbreak.

The savage beheading of Steven Sotloff, following the savage beheading of James Foley, and following Steven Sotloff's mother Shirley's heartfelt appeal to the leadership of ISIS, please let my son come home, make us feel that our whole world is in the throes of a scary darkness. If journalists can get beheaded, if a mother's appeal for mercy is rebuffed, if ISIS is on the march,

the sun cannot be shining. Kahlil Gibran's description of the sun as nothing more than the caster of shadows seems to take in our collective moment.

It is for just such a time as this that we recite the penitential psalm, psalm 27, that we say in this month of Elul as we prepare ourselves for the high holidays.

Psalm 27 lists many of the greatest sources of pain that we can ever know: The death of our parents. Armies arrayed against me. False witnesses that say untrue and unkind things about me. A pervasive sense of living in a cold and cruel world, a world lacking love and compassion. A pervasive sense of being alone in such a world. That is the author's world. That all too often feels like our world now.

What is the psalmist's response to this painful place? Let's stand back for a moment.

There are many depictions of God in our tradition. *Aveinu*. God is our father. *Malkeinu*. God is our king. God is our judge. God will forgive us. God is our warrior. God will fight for us. God is our protector. God will guard us from harm. God is the compassionate one. God will have mercy on us. God is our healer. God will save us from the pit of death.

This psalm, psalm 27, adds yet one more understanding of God. When the world is filled with darkness, God is going to get me back to light. When the world is filled with despair, God is going to get me back to hope. The psalm begins with "Adonai is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear?" The psalm ends with "Hope in Adonai. Be strong, take courage, and hope in Adonai."

Now, you can very fairly ask how does all this work? The atrocities that happened, happened. James Foley and Steven Sotloff are still both beheaded, Shirley Sotloff's plea is still rejected, ISIS is still on the march. How does invoking Adonai, the God of psalm 27 change this in any way?

Rabbi Shai Held famously observed that Judaism is great at telling us *what* to do, but not so good at telling us *how* to do it. Perhaps psalm 27 is an example of this. The psalm tells us have faith in Adonai, but it does not seem to tell us *how* to have that faith, or what to do if we do *not* have that faith.

And yet, if we dig deeper, we get an insight into the heart of Judaism's approach to our broken world.

It is *not* that we are supposed to say the psalm once and our world magically changes.

Rather, we say this psalm *twice a day*, every morning and every evening, for almost two months. In other words, *not giving up on life, not giving in to the darkness, is a long-term project.*

Hope is not an emotion. Hope is work. Hope is not something you just feel. Hope is something you earn through persistent and relentless work. You keep at it. Every morning. Every night. Every day. Repeat.

Now you can be skeptical of psalm 27, of this God of hope.

You can be skeptical of this project of creating hope by working at it every day.

That's fine. Such skepticism is all very well founded.

I have only one question for you. *What is your alternative?* One alternative would be to own Kahlil Gibran's dark place: the sun as a caster of shadows. But that makes for a sad and angry life.

Psalm 27 offers us an alternative. And I can tell you one thing about psalm 27. It works. Consider the story of Kent Brantly.

We all know about the terrible Ebola virus in West Africa that has claimed over 1,500 lives. The disease spreads, and terror over catching this disease spreads as well. You might have

seen the picture of the dead man, a victim of Ebola, lying unburied on the street in Liberia, for people were afraid to touch him lest they contract the virus.

It is into that darkness that Dr. Kent Brantly made a deliberate decision to go. He went into the heart of Liberia to treat really sick people. In an interview he gave this week to Matt Lauer he told of treating his first Ebola patient, a young woman in her 20s, who succumbed to the disease. He made a point of touching her, of not recoiling from her. Why? Because she was a human being. She was not a disease.

And then, after treating people with Ebola, with love and dignity, he got Ebola.

Thank goodness, we know that this story had a happier ending. Dr. Brantly was flown to Emory, he was given an experimental treatment, he has recovered and is no longer contagious.

But the question remains: why would a young man, age 33, happily married, and with two small children to raise, rush into Liberia to treat patients with serious and potentially fatal infectious diseases. The rest of the world runs away from Ebola. He runs towards it. Why? All the news reports about Dr. Brantly refer to him as “an American missionary doctor.” We know what an American is. We know what a doctor is. What is a missionary? Here is what he told Matt Lauer:

Faith is central to my life. I am who I am, I do what I do because of my faith...

I feel like God called me to be a medical missionary. That’s why I was in Liberia in the first place.

In his darkest moments, with a spiraling fever, with chills, all alone, and far from home and far from hope, he prayed to God for the strength to get through it.

We are not medical missionaries. Most of us are not going to Liberia. Most of us do not feel called by God as Dr. Brantly believed himself to be called by God. And yet, what God did for Dr. Brantly God can do for us, in our own quieter ways, in our own less dramatic lives.

God filled his life with purpose. God can do that for us. Fill our life with purpose. Our life has to be about more than just ourselves. More than making it through our day.

God partnered with him to fix a broken world. We don't have to go to Liberia to find brokenness. We have plenty of local brokenness. We can partner with God to fix our own brokenness, in our own lives, our own families, in our own world right here.

God gave him the strength to get through the rough patches so that he could get to the other side. Yes, it was also modern medicine, and an airplane that transported him from Liberia to Atlanta, and the expert medical team at Emory, and miraculous antibiotics, that got him to the other side. God's love is delivered by human beings, and we can be a part of that delivery system, too.

The God of Psalm 27 offers us not an instant cure or a quick panacea, but a lifelong project by which those who are bound and determined to find meaning, purpose, order and joy, if we keep at it every day, we will, one day, find it.

If we don't want to live in a world where the sun is the caster of shadows, keep praying and keep working. The world has its darkness. But we can see, and we can be, God's light. Shabbat shalom.