Emunah in Difficult Times

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EMUNAH IN THE FACE OF TRAGEDY: A CHAPLAIN'S PERSPECTIVE

As a retired military chaplain and an active healthcare chaplain, I was asked to write about "maintaining emunah in the face of tragedy" from a chaplain's perspective. What is a chaplain? Wikipedia defines chaplain as: "...a cleric (such as a minister, priest, pastor, rabbi, or imam), or a lay representative of a religious tradition, attached to a secular institution such as a hospital, prison, military unit, school, business, police department, fire department, university, or private chapel." Historically, the term "chaplain" was generally used to refer to clergy in the military. Since the government is responsible for ensuring that the full social structure in civilian life — including religious guidance and practice — is available to military personnel and their families, chaplains, including Jewish clergy, are an integral part of military life. In that context, rabbis play a unique role. While many Jews grew up in a Jewish milieu, with family or Jewish institutions nearby, the number of Jews on any particular military base or ship or site can be very small. Contact with a Jewish chaplain is therefore precious because it gives a Jew the feeling that he or she is not alone. The ability of a Jewish chaplain to reach out and impact the lives of such Jews is inestimable. "Kiruv" within the military setting by a chaplain (and family) can be especially effective. Practically all chaplains have stories about how they influenced the religiosity of soldiers in a most positive sense. In times of war or even just being assigned to a place of conflict, the presence, prayers and support of a chaplain strengthens and restores faith in times of fear and fright.

The story of U.S. Navy Chaplain Arnold Resnicoff is but one example of the challenges facing chaplains. While stationed with the Sixth Fleet in Italy, he was sent to Beirut, Lebanon, during the Lebanon Civil

War to lead a Friday Memorial Service for an American Jewish marine who had been killed there by sniper fire. Rabbi Resnicoff was offered transportation back to his ship the next day, but would not travel on Shabbat and stayed with the marines in Beirut. On early Sunday morning, Oct. 23, 1983, the marine barracks where he was staying was blown up by an Islamic terrorist truck bomb, killing 241 U.S. and 58 French peacekeepers. Chaplain Resnicoff survived the bombing and assisted in the rescue of wounded marines. This was a great Kiddush Hashem. When Rabbi Resnicoff used his own kippah to wipe the blood from an injured marine's face, a fellow chaplain, a Catholic priest, tore off a piece of his own camouflage uniform and fashioned a kippah for Rabbi Resnicoff to wear during his rescue efforts.

Chaplain Resnicoff survived, but other chaplains made the ultimate sacrifice, such as Rabbi Alexander Goode, one of four chaplains on the U.S.A.T. Dorchester army transport ship that was torpedoed by the Germans during World War II in the North Atlantic. These four chaplains — a Jew, a Methodist, a Roman Catholic and a Dutch Reformed — each voluntarily gave up their life jackets so that other soldiers could be saved. As the ship was sinking, the chaplains prayed while they went down with the ship, their arms linked together in their final moments of life, while the survivors in nearby rafts were spiritually transformed as they witnessed this heroic act of faith. (A monument was dedicated in Arlington Cemetery on Oct. 24, 2011, to memorialize 14 Jewish chaplains who died while on active military duty.)

Indeed, throughout Jewish history, Jewish leaders have provided such faith and succor in the face of fear, even if the title may have been different. Yirmiyahu — Jeremiah — was the prophet who not only led the lament of our People at the time of the destruction of the first Holy Temple and the exile of the Jewish People from the Holy Land, but he also — chaplain-like — provided hope that all was not lost. He composed Eichah — Lamentations, but he also assured the Jewish People that they would survive in the Exile and return to the Holy Land (e.g., Jer. 29: 4-14).

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This reference to Jeremiah is especially poignant during this Tisha B'Av season when we read his book of "Lamentations." Even his name has been transformed into a sorrowful English word — **jeremiad** — translated by Webster as "a prolonged lamentation or complaint." In reality, Jeremiah has been my chaplain model because each of his calamitous predictions and prophecies are followed by words that hold out hope for repentance and restoration. Jeremiah beckons us to repent and avoid actions that are destructive — either physically, morally or ethically — and warns about their severe consequences, and yet offers some concluding words of comfort. Even more than Yeshayahu (Isaiah), whose chapters of dire warning and chapters of comfort are separate sections of his Biblical book, in Jeremiah, these contradictory messages are complementary.

If I have a patient whose living standards could be injurious — such as an unhealthy lifestyle or substance abuse — we would discuss their negative impact and their harmful effects, and always hold out the possibility of a lifestyle change for the better.

One of the primary roles of the prophets was to rebuke the nation for their wrongdoings. When we think of "rebuke" we may think of fire and brimstone, but that is not what rebuke is about. Rebuke is about bringing people closer to God. The Talmud (*Arachin* 16b) states that while fire and brimstone may have worked in previous generations, we aren't adept at providing this type of rebuke. Indeed, Maimonides (*Deiot* 6:7) states that rebuke is most effective when one speaks in a soft tone and explains to the listener that change is in the best interest of the listener. This is not only an important tool for chaplains, it is an important tool for anyone who wants to help a friend or family member change.

Verily, one of Jeremiah's most startling teachings has practical halakhic applications. Jeremiah's life was dedicated to convincing the Israelites to repent of their idol worship and

sinful ways so that they could remain in the Holy Land and not face exile. Yet after the exile of the Jewish People from the Holy Land, he didn't resign in failure, but instructed the Jews to:

וְדִרְשׁוּ אֶת שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגְלֵיתִי אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ בַעֲדָהּ אֶל ה' כִּי בִשְׁלוֹמָהּ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שָׁלוֹם.

Seek the welfare of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive and pray to the Lord for it, for with its peace, you shall have peace.
Jeremiah 29:7

This verse is the basis of the halakhic teaching in *Avot* (3:2):

הוי מתפלל בשלומה של מלכות, שאלמלא מוראה, איש את רעהו חיים בלעו.

Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear of it, people would swallow one another alive.
Alas, many synagogues omit this prayer for the welfare of the government — "*Hanotain teshuah lamelachim*" or a similar petition, and perhaps the sad result is a lack of appreciation for our country. We should also be appreciative of our military service members and their chaplains, who are following Jeremiah's commandment to seek to preserve the well-being of our country as its peacekeepers!

As noted, Jeremiah is also a guide for chaplains in a hospital or healthcare setting. They are often called upon to caringly minister to sick and dying patients and their families whom they do not know at all. Chaplains quickly bond with their frightened and scared patients who are so in need of their prayers, guidance and company. The chaplain invites the patient/family to share their honest and heartfelt feelings, and encourages them to express their fears, concerns and hopes — be they from a spiritual, religious or purely personal perspective — and the chaplain seeks to validate them. For religious questions, depending upon the faith and observance level of the patient/family, the chaplain may address theological concerns or discuss halakhic queries and try to offer appropriate guidance for that patient. Often, this may be the first occasion for these patients to fully confront intimate life and death issues. Sometimes it can be easier for people to discuss such personal matters of faith and belief objectively with a healthcare chaplain than with their own rav or spiritual leader, who may be too close to be able to step back and consider a broader perspective.

Usually a chaplain can discern that though a question or comment may initially be couched in theological terminology, the patient is not really looking for a philosophical or religious treatise, but rather is seeking a representative of God who can be a sacred presence merely by being there to listen to and walk with the patient to wherever his or her feelings may lead. It is really the chaplain's presence and heartfelt personal prayer — not preaching — that are most cathartic. In the sixth chapter of *Avot*, one of the 48 methods for acquiring Torah is *nosei b'ol im chaveiro*, carrying some of the burden of one's friend. In modern terms, this is called empathy, and it is a recognition that sometimes just being there for someone in a time of need can be more therapeutic than any words. This idea expresses itself in a halakha related to paying a shiva call. The visitors are not supposed to start a conversation with the mourner, but rather should wait for the mourner to start the conversation (*Yoreh De'ah* 376:1). It is a recognition that sometimes that mourner feels more comforted by the presence of visitors without having a conversation.

Using empathy, trained Jewish chaplains can be especially impactful when they can visualize the Tzelem Elokim present in every person, and can truly be Mekadaish Shem Shamayim (sanctify God's name) when caringly assisting all people — regardless of their religion or faith.

In *Pirkei Avot* 4:13, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov teaches that if we perform even one mitzvah, "*koneh lo praklit echad*," we acquire an angelic intercessor, according to the Bartenura. The *Tiferet Yisrael* commentary there further elaborates and teaches that through our good deeds and mitzvah observances, we can transform

ourselves to be like a Divine angelic being. I never realized the power of this teaching until the following true story occurred. It was my most overpowering chaplaincy experience — seeking to instill "emunah in the face of tragedy" — for Jews and Gentiles alike, and finding myself most humbled and overwhelmed in return.

Active members of my synagogue's Sisterhood met weekly in the home of Grace, where she had a kiln, and they enjoyed a ceramics-making class. Grace was a devoted church-going Catholic who appreciated religious commitment, and she therefore especially enjoyed her friendship with my Sisterhood members — because of their devotion to their House of God.

Shelley, my Sisterhood president, lived across the street from Grace, and their families were good and close friends. Grace and her husband Lester often supported Sisterhood fund-raising projects to benefit my congregation, and I got to know them well. Lester was an army veteran, and he eventually was hospitalized in the nearby VA Hospital where I was the part-time Jewish chaplain. I therefore regularly visited Lester during my hospital rounds. Lester's condition was failing, and one particular morning I visited him and noticed how he had weakened. An hour later, an emergency code was announced over the hospital's loudspeakers. I recognized the room number as being Lester's. He had a massive heart attack and was pronounced dead by the time I entered the room.

Lester's doctor was assigned to this unit to minister to many elderly and fragile patients who often died in the hospital, and this doctor seemed to me to be somewhat emotionally distant from and unmoved by his patients' conditions. The doctor matter-of-factly announced: "I'll have to call this vet's wife and tell her that her husband died."

I knew that the doctor would share that news in an impersonal, cold manner. I also knew that Grace, who was not well herself, was home alone, since I had called her after seeing her husband earlier that morning. I knew that it would be devastating and potentially fatal to Grace if the doctor made this call now. I told the doctor that Grace's condition was such that she couldn't take that call now alone. I asked him to give me an hour to try to reach a close friend of Grace's to be with her at this time. Fortunately, Shelley was home, and I told her of Lester's death (this was before HIPAA), and that the doctor would be calling Grace soon with the news. Shelley immediately agreed to go over and visit Grace, which was not unusual for her. During Shelley's visit to Grace, the doctor called and gave Grace the news about her husband's death. Shelley was able to provide Grace with the emotional support that she needed at the dreadful moment.

When I visited Grace later that afternoon in her home, still grief-stricken and surrounded by family and friends, including Shelley, Grace told us that "an angel of God miraculously sent Shelley to me this morning." With her innate faith, Grace truly believed that God finds a way to provide assistance when most needed. With real faith in God, Grace was sure that a Divine-ministering angel had sent Shelley — who had not been to her home for a week — to visit her that very morning in order to be there when her presence was most needed.

Grace kept on telling visitors, "An angel of God miraculously sent Shelley to me this morning." Grace never found out that I was that "angel of God."

One need not be a chaplain to be "an angel of God." We all have the capacity of love within us to emulate God — Imitatio Dei.

Israelis are still exploring what the best Hebrew translation of "chaplain" should be. "*Melave ruchani*" — "a spiritually guiding companion" is the preferred definition for many.

May we all be privileged to be angels of God, spiritually guiding with Divine inspiration.

I am especially honored to dedicate this *Torah To-Go* issue in memory of my dear parents: Rabbi Meyer (d. 7 Tammuz) and Rose (d. 3 Tishrei) Kramer, a"h. They were angels of God who inspired me and so many others to remember that we are all created with the Image of God. *Yehi zichram baruch.*