

**Yom Kippur Sermon 2014/5775**  
**Finding Hope In The Face of Hopelessness:**  
**In Our Lives, In Our Communities, In Israel, & Around the World**  
**by Rabbi Lisa S. Malik, Ph.D.**

Robin Williams.

Had I mentioned this famous actor and comedian's name a year ago, the first words that might have come to your mind are "Mork & Mindy" or "Mrs. Doubtfire". But, after Robin Williams' suicide this past summer, another word that comes to our minds when we hear his name is "depression."

In the hours, days, and weeks following Williams' death, everyone, from newscasters to entertainment celebrities to pop psychologists, seemed to weigh in with his/her theory as to why Mr. Williams committed suicide. One of the rationales that kept coming up was his recent diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease; some speculated that Robin killed himself because he didn't want to experience the gradual and inevitable deterioration of his body.

Although depression is often considered to be an extreme state of sadness, there is a difference between sadness and clinical depression. **There aren't always logical reasons for a clinically depressed person's dark feelings.** Well-meaning friends and relatives should not exhort a depressed individual to "snap out of it", because a clinically depressed person cannot "snap out of it" any more than a diabetic person can will his pancreas to produce more insulin.



While depression is widespread, it is not nearly as common as sadness. Sadness is part of the human condition. When one is faced with painful events or situations, it is a natural reaction to feel unhappy; and depending on your personality and the severity of the pain, that sadness can often be accompanied by feelings of despair and hopelessness. It is natural to 'fall into a slump' in response to adverse circumstances.



In the words of Dr. Seuss (in his book, "Oh The Places You Will Go"),

"When you're in a slump, you're not in for much fun;  
un-slumping yourself is not easily done."



**Many events and situations can provide the impetus for 'falling into a slump' in which we may feel sad and hopeless.**

When someone you love is diagnosed with cancer and the prognosis is grim, the sadness can be overwhelming. The death of a parent, grandparent, spouse, sibling, or, God forbid, a child, can be devastating.

For many of us, financial adversity can be the trigger for feelings of sadness. Decreased income when you lose a job or increased expenses when you buy a home or your children go to college can make you feel frustrated and helpless, as well.



**Feeling sad is a natural reaction to pain and adversity in our individual lives. But it is also possible to feel sad in reaction to pain and adversity in our community.** The deaths of some active participants in the life of our shul in 5774, including Gail Siegel, Art Percy, & Irwin Pearl z”l, were acutely felt by many Temple Beth Ahm members, not just by the relatives of the deceased.

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We may also feel sad, and even hopeless, in reaction to events in the worldwide Jewish community, beyond the walls of our synagogue

This past summer, Jews around the world mourned the deaths of **Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaer, & Naphtali Fraenkel z”l**, the 3 Israeli teenagers who were kidnapped and murdered by Hamas terrorists. The figurative black cloud that loomed over all of our heads became progressively darker as Hamas launched thousands of rockets from Gaza into Israel, throughout the duration of Operation Protective Edge (*Tzuk Eitan*).

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And the **ominous tone of the summer** extended beyond the borders of Israel and Gaza. Throughout the months of June, July, & August, news headlines reminded us over and over again that **the world is a scary place**.

Photos of people with bags over their heads, being led to their deaths, appeared repeatedly online and in the print media. **Executions** took place around the world and were not limited to the “collaborators with Israel” who were murdered in broad daylight by Hamas; like-minded thugs associated with ISIS (the Islamic State) also contributed to this summer of terror. Even though the YouTube video released by ISIS was removed shortly after it was initially posted, who could forget the indelible photographic image of the journalist, **James Foley**, dressed in orange, brought to his knees in the desert, about to be executed? Who could forget the similar videos of **Steve Satloff & David Haines**, taken just a few weeks later? According to an article (Sept. 3) in the Jewish Press, “beheading is rapidly becoming the new fashion method for terrorists.”

There was also evidence of **physical and psychological terror in Europe.** Terror struck the hearts of Jews in Paris & London, as anti-Semitic incidents wreaked havoc in these European cities. According to a poll published in The Jewish Chronicle in London this August, 68% of British Jews believe that there is no future in Great Britain for Jews. Even more so, 75% of French Jews felt this way.

**Anti-Semitism is rampant around the world:** whether it takes the overt form of attacks on a Parisian synagogue (Synagogue de la Roquette) amidst cries of "Death to the Jews" by a hundred hateful French Moslem youths, or whether it is a more 'subtle' type of anti-Semitism in the form of the BDS movement and other anti-Israel rhetoric pervading the Internet and the mainstream media.

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Even so-called 'reputable' **media** like CNN and the New York Times continuously depicted (and continue to depict) Israel in ways that were not only biased but also, often, inaccurate. It should seem obvious that Israel's Operation Protective Edge was a necessary war that Israel had to fight in order to protect its citizens from the onslaught of rocket attacks from Hamas terrorist in Gaza.

It should have seemed obvious that Israel did not want to harm innocent Palestinians while attacking the tunnels and other aspects of Gaza's terrorist infrastructure. It should have seemed obvious to all that Hamas, not Israel, was to blame for the death of Palestinian civilians, because of its use of civilians as "human shields", telling them to stay put, not to evacuate, in response to Israeli warnings.

While these points may have seemed obvious to many of us, it was clearly not so obvious to the NY Times and other media that insisted on portraying Israel as the 'bad guy', with Jews and non-Jews imbibing the biased narrative of Israel as an oppressor and aggressor. More often than not, the mainstream media focused on the names and faces of the Palestinian children and other civilians who were killed by Israeli fire in an shameless attempt to garner sympathy for the Palestinians, **without providing a context as to where and why they were killed, or how Hamas encouraged these people to stay in the line of fire, or how the IDF tried to prevent their deaths.** More often than not, the mainstream media blamed Israel, rather than portraying Israel as the victim, whose civilians were the target of over 3000 rockets from Gaza during the month of July alone, civilians whose daily life was disrupted by the sounds of sirens and mad dashes to nearby bomb shelters.

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Unfortunately, criticism of Israel is not limited to 'the media'; **criticism of Israel also comes from within the Jewish community itself:**

In the film, "The J Street Challenge", **Professor Robert Landes** of **Boston University** uses the term "**moral narcissism**" to explain the motivation of Israel's critics from within the Jewish community. The critique of Israel that is expressed by Jews who are part of J-Street and similar organizations, such as *B'Tzelem* & *T'ruah*: Rabbis for Human Rights, is not for the betterment of Israel; their anti-Israel criticism is a means of making their selves feel morally superior.

The "**moral narcissism**" of these anti-Israel organizations that are comprised of Jews and that claim to be 'pro-Israel' is repugnant.

So, although Jews around the world were not literally diagnosed with clinical depression as a result of events in Israel and around the world this past summer, many did **describe this summer's events as "depressing."** The headline on the cover of the NJJN on July 29 reflected a sentiment that many of us were feeling. It read, **"A Way Out?"** I must admit that even I, at times, felt hopeless and helpless, skeptical about the possibility of "a way out", not just a way out of this one war and this most recent Israeli military operation in Gaza, but a way out of the ongoing hostilities between Palestinians & Israelis, & between anti-Semites and Jews worldwide.

As a result of biased anti-Israel sentiments among Jews, non-Jews, journalists, and consumers of news reports, as well as hate crimes directed against Israel-supporters around the world, the global Jewish community felt increasingly anxious, fearful, and vulnerable during the summer of 2014.

In the weeks before Rosh HaShanah, I wondered, **"How is it possible to feel hope despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation in Israel and around the world?"**

I found one answer to this question in a (2011) film entitled, **"Israel Inside: How A Small Nation Makes a Big Difference."** In the words of the film's narrator/host, **Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar**, "When people think about Israel, they think about war.... or religion.... or even falafel. But to me, when I think about Israel, I think of the **triumph of the human spirit.** Israelis, surrounded by enemies, have turned a desert with hardly any natural resources into a **flourishing, productive, and caring society.** .....When I think about Israel, I think about a country beyond the conflict, clichés, and the controversy."

So, **one of the ways that we make find hope in the face of the seemingly hopeless situation in Israel is to focus on the positives.** Israel shouldn't be viewed just as a war zone or as a target for anti-Semitic terrorists. Israel is also **a place where Jewish values are embodied**, including the values of **striving, improvement, and growth** that we emphasize so much in Judaism, especially on the High Holidays.

In the words of the **AIPAC** High Holiday publication for synagogues, entitled, "**Israel Connection**, "Israel is the only liberal democracy in the Middle East, a region dominated by ethnic strife and religious fundamentalism." "The modern state of Israel is a true miracle and a light unto the nations. As a leader in bio-technology, Israel's innovations change lives."

Israel is the fastest growing and one of the most dynamic, entrepreneurial, and innovation-based economies in the world. According to the venture capitalist, **Jonathan Medwed**, "Nowhere in the world outside of Silicon Valley will you find more high-tech start-ups than in Israel. " If you look at countries that are represented in the NASDAQ stock exchange, the ranking is #1, of course, the United States, #2 is China, and #3 is Israel. This is an amazing fact for a tiny country to actually eclipse all of the nations of Europe in the creativity of its entrepreneurial leadership."

Israel has developed some of the worlds' leading technologies. For example, there is **ReWalk**, a device that enables paralyzed people to function without using a wheelchair. In addition, many of **Intel's microprocessors** were designed in Israel. A major innovation in the 1930's that made the most of Israel's very limited water supply is **drip irrigation**, which was invented by the Israeli company, **Netafim**. This technology revolutionized the farming industry in Israel and around the world.

The sharing of drip irrigation with farmers outside of Israel, is not only indicative of Israel's leadership role in the realm of technology; it is also illustrative of the **value that Israel places on helping others**. In the words of **Naty Barak**, who is Netafim's Chief Sustainability Officer, "I wanted to do something, not just for myself. I wanted to do something good for Israel, for society... and also for the world." This sentiment reflects a timeless Jewish value known as **Tikkun Olam**, the imperative to repair the world. From an early age, Israelis are taught **to take responsibility for others, not just for themselves**.

The Jewish imperative of Tikkun Olam is embraced by the organization known as **“Save A Child’s Heart.”** Since 1995, doctors affiliated with this organization have performed thousands of life-saving open-heart surgeries to children, free of charge: not only in Israel, but elsewhere in the Middle East and in other places such as China, Indonesia, and Ghana. Over half of these surgeries have been performed on Palestinian children. In the words of Dr. Sion Houry, one of “Save A Child’s Heart’s” surgeons, “We don’t care about your color. We don’t care about your religion. We don’t care about your financial status. If you need our help, we are here to do that.”

Tikkun Olam is also the motivating force behind the organization, **IsraAid**, which was one of the first on the scene to help in the aftermath of many natural disasters worldwide, from the earthquake in Haiti to the Tsunami.

In addition to Tikkun Olam, another core character strength that makes Israel so special and successful is its **ability to bounce back from adversity**, turning it into advantage. Jews have lived in Israel since biblical times, but, as you know, they/we were kicked out repeatedly. But each time they were exiled, the Jewish people seemed to grow stronger. There were many challenges that Israel faced in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as well. But despite the inhospitable desert landscape, the unemployment, and the poverty, modern Zionists overcame these adversities. With every challenge, from the War of Independence, to all of the subsequent wars, to terrorist threats, to the absorption of thousands of immigrants, Israel has been extremely **resilient**. Israel has not only withstood every challenge it faced, it seemed to grow even stronger. According to the corporate executive, Orna Berry, “You can either sit, cry, & die [when the world around you seems bleak and hopeless.], or you can decide that you are taking the knowledge that you have and you build very strong teams that are problem solvers.” The **resilience of Israelis in the face of adversity** may be a contributing factor to the incredible innovations coming out of Israel.

Reflecting upon the resilience of the Jewish people in general, and of Israel in particular, I feel some **hope despite the depressing events** in Israel and around the world during the summer of 2014. Israel and the Jewish people's ability to bounce back after adversity, as evidenced by the extent of Israel's technological innovations, enables me to answer the question that I posed earlier, "**How is it possible to feel hope despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation in Israel and around the world?**"

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I found another **answer to this question in the psalm** that we add to our prayers during this season of *teshuvah*. From Rosh Chodesh Elul until the end of Sukkot, it is traditional to recite Psalm 27, which includes the words,

***"Luley he-emanti lirot b'tuv Adonai b'eretz chayim."***

**"Oh that my faith was such that I could see the goodness of God in the land of the living."**

The words "*eretz chayim*" ("land of the living") are unclear; they have puzzled the commentators for centuries. The Malbim says that this phrase refers to the Land of Israel. Ramban says that this phrase refers to the World to Come (*Olam Ha-Ba*). Metzudat Tzion says that this phrase refers to "this world" (*olam ha-zeh*). Personally, I love the interpretation offered by **Rhonda Rosenheck**, a past principal of the Ivry Prozdor High School at JTS. She says that **"the land of the living" ("*eretz chayim*") refers to "reality" and to the "real world" in which "both evil and good exist simultaneously."**

In an article that she wrote in 2001 (5762), Ms. Rosenheck alluded to her own personal tragedies as well as to the horrific communal tragedy of **September 11**.

Rhonda's father died in a plane crash when he was only 50 years old, and she was only 24. Then, in that same year, some other very special people in Rhonda's life died: her grandfather, two great uncles, her personal mentor, and the "love of her life". So, **how was she able to move beyond the initial feelings of sadness and hopelessness that these losses evoked?**

In Rosenheck's words, "A friend once asked me: **How can you be such a realist yet be so hopeful?**" Rhonda's answer to her friend was as follows: "Why do you assume that I have to deny the full range of reality ("the land of the living") to believe that the world is full of goodness?..... Sometimes, we all know, dreadful things happen. Sometimes evil seems to gain the upper hand..... But, like the psalmist (of Psalm 27), I work at seeing the good of God in the "land of the living.""

**May we learn from Rhonda's example**, as we attempt to deal with our own personal tragedies as well as with the communal tragedies that have affected Jews in Israel, Europe, and around the world. Given the physical and verbal attacks against Israel, as well as all of the Israel-bashing in the media and the rampant global anti-Semitism, let us **strive to move beyond our feelings of sadness and hopelessness**. As the concluding words of Psalm 27 of urge us, let us try to **"have faith that [we] will surely see the good of God in the land of the living**. [Let us] **hope in Adonai. Be strong, take courage, and hope in Adonai."**

***Lulay he-e-manti lirot b'tuv Adonai b'eretz chayim.***

***Kaveh el Adonai. Chazak v'yaametz libecha. V'kaveh el Adonai"***

Despite the seeming hopelessness that we sometimes feel, despite how depressing the news may be, let us **continue to hope**, keeping in mind the title of the Israeli national anthem, "**Ha-Tikvah**", which means "The Hope." Facing the Jerusalem stone in our newly renovated sanctuary, let us keep Israel and worldwide Jewry in our minds and hearts, as we **stand together and sing "HaTikvah" together, with all of the *kavannah* (intentionality) that is in our hearts. (SING HA-TIKVAH.)**