

FOCUS: On Hardship & Hope

Lifeline to the Future

Hope is a thread, however elusive, that links us to a possible future. It demands that we take hold of it; otherwise, it is just a loose thread.

BY MICHAEL MARMUR

The late Hugo Gryn, a Reform rabbi who spent most of his career in Britain, was in Auschwitz as a child along with his father. In his memoir he recounts:

The Jewish prisoners in our barracks—Block 4—decided that we would celebrate [Chanukah] by lighting a menorah every night. Bits of wood and metal were collected and shaped into light-holders and everyone agreed to save the week's meager ration of margarine that would be used for fuel. It was my job to take apart an abandoned prison cap and fashion wicks from its threads.

[On] the first night of Chanukah...most of Block 4 gathered around the menorah—including some Roman Catholic Poles, several Protestant Norwegians and...a German count who was implicated in the attempt on Hitler's life. Two portions of margarine were melted down—my wicks in place. We chanted the blessing, praising God who "performed miracles for our ancestors in those days and at this time," and as...I tried to light the wick, there was only a bit of spluttering and no flame.... What the "scientists" in our midst failed to point out was that margarine does not burn!

As we dispersed and made our way to the bunk beds I turned not so much to my father, but on him, upset at the fiasco and bemoaning this waste of precious calories. Patiently, he taught me one of the most lasting lessons of my life and I

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believe that he made my survival possible. "Don't be so angry," he said to me. "You know that this festival celebrates



the victory of the spirit over tyranny and might. You and I have had to go once for over a week without proper food and another time almost three days without water, but you cannot live for three minutes without hope!" (Chasing Shadows: Memories of a Vanished World, 2000).

Indeed, in Jewish culture and tradition hope is perceived as a central and indispensable aspect of life. But the following story illustrates a different emphasis:

At the height of his power...when it appeared that all of Europe was at his feet, Napoleon ordered three POWs to be brought to him: a Russian, a Pole, and a Jew. Before their release, he said they could ask anything of him and he would see that their wish was fulfilled. The Russian asked that the czar be deposed. The Pole called for the creation of a free

and independent Poland. The Jew asked for some schmaltz herring. Napoleon granted all three requests, leaving the Russian and the Pole enthralled by the prospect of having brought salvation to their nations. When the story of the meeting became known, members of the Jew's congregation asked him why he had not made better use of the opportunity. Why didn't he ask for a homeland for the Jews, or for guarantees of security? The Jewish soldier answered: "Do you think Napoleon will really topple the czar or free Poland? I, on the other hand, at least received some good schmaltz herring."

To some, this second story might appear as nothing but a joke. But I believe it has something significant to tell us about the way Jews hope, and what we hope for.



First, it is important to make a distinction between hope and optimism. The two are often confused, but they are profoundly different. To be optimistic means to believe that everything is heading towards a happy ending. To have hope means to believe that whatever happens, a way of coping and building towards the future may be found. Some of us seem to be hard-wired for optimism, convinced that things will work out well, and others for pessimism. Some folks wake up in the morning with a wow! and others with an oy! ➤