

Morning Has Broken  
Faith After October 7th



Yeshiva University  
THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN  
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP





Erica Brown

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**Faith After October 7th**

The Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center  
for Values and Leadership, Yeshiva University

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*Dedicated to my mother-in-law*

***Barbara Brown***

*who was hospitalized on October 7th  
in Israel and died during this war,  
and to nineteen-year-old IDF Sergeant Lavi Ghasi,  
who was killed in Northern Gaza  
and buried in the same cemetery an hour earlier.*

*And, finally, to Hersh.  
How we hoped and prayed for your return.*

*May you all be remembered  
for gentler, happier days.*

*In memory of everyone who was massacred  
on that fateful day in October  
and everyone who has died serving the country since.  
And to the thousands of living heroes  
who have not given up the fight.*

*Debbie and Elliot Gibber and Family*

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# Waking Up in Jerusalem

**T**he sun cracks open on the city where three of my four children were born. These are God's hours. Silence shields the city. The world has yet to wake up. Soon the swifts will saw across the sky singing to Jerusalem. Then the sun will rise and bleach the city's walls. Here even the hard stones hold our fragile prayers.

"Jerusalem," Yehuda Amichai once wrote, "is a port city on the shore of eternity." At this hour, the serenity the psalmist prayed for seems almost possible.

The Talmud records that ten measures of beauty and suffering descended to the world. Jerusalem took nine and gave the world the rest.<sup>1</sup> Beauty and pain always live in proximity. Every woman knows that.

Whatever happens to this city and this country will elevate the heart and sometimes puncture it no matter where you live. Elsewhere Amichai writes, "Jerusalem is built on the vaulted foundations of a held-back scream."

These days, it is too often the scream of a siren as people in the south and north rush elderly parents and toddlers into protective rooms in ninety seconds. It's the Edvard Munch open mouth of young people from a music festival on the border of Gaza crammed into a bomb shelter when

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a grenade is thrown inside. It's the torment of a Jewish university student who is told to go back to the gas chambers, her belief in humanity splintered into glass shards. It's the mother who stands alone on the street crying and still waving goodbye to her son who left hours ago for his base.

The emotional shrapnel of trauma lodges deep inside the body.

It connects each Jew to the shrapnel of Jewish history. We are a horizontal people: suffering comes before us, and it will come after us. We are a vertical people, who hold onto faith and look heavenward at the meaning we attach to our pain and the strange way that suffering amplifies the contours of joys.

A few days ago, I left a wedding hall to watch a video of a hostage family. A few minutes later, I rejoined the dancing. It felt more honest to bring the suffering right there with me. Under the bridal canopy, we closed our eyes and sang, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem..."

I cannot forget, even amidst crystal and flowers and young love. The verse mandates that Jerusalem is put above "my chief joy." To give a sliver of joy to the bitterness and a smattering of sadness to delight has taught us to live wholeheartedly in this short life. It enriches our faith.

There is always suffering on the way. There is always joy on the way.

It is good to be prepared.

# The Lord Is My Light

*The Lord is my light and my help; whom should I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, whom should I dread? When evil men assail me to devour my flesh, it is they, my foes and my enemies, who stumble and fall. Should an army besiege me, my heart would have no fear; should war beset me, still would I be confident. (Ps. 27:1–3)*

The psalmist faces war unfazed. His faith is intact and carries him across the perils of battle like someone evacuated on a stretcher amidst gunfire. With God by his side, no army can induce terror in him. No one can intimidate him. The devouring of flesh does not unsettle him.

Each day of Elul I recite this psalm twice, but after October 7th, it unsettles me, so I deconstruct it, line by line, to see if it can bolster my faith during this war. Enemies *are* upon us. They *have* assailed us. The world looks away. Hostages waste away. Does the psalmist really have no fear? I am terribly afraid. I wonder what carries him across the narrow bridge of dread.



It must be the small miracles of war that keep the psalmist steady. They are not small miracles at all. Today, on the 326th day of the war, my daughter tells me to look at the news; it's a small miracle. A fifty-two-year-old

hostage, a Bedouin, Qaid Farhan al-Qadi, was rescued by an elite IDF unit from a tunnel in the southern Gaza Strip. Al-Qadi was abducted from a packing factory in Kibbutz Magen on October 7th. Ironically, he worked there as a guard. Today he will see his eleven children again.



Then there are the miracles of biblical proportion. One night in mid-April, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps partnered with Hezbollah and Yemenite Houthis to launch hundreds of drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles at Israel. Almost nothing happened. Most Israelis slept through it and complained about school cancellations the next day. On a mid-August night a few months later, Israel preempted a retaliatory Hezbollah strike at 4:00 am aimed at decimating Israeli infrastructure at 5:00 am. Not one Israeli soldier died. The airport closed temporarily. Foreign airlines canceled flights. A few hours later, people went back to work. Flights resumed. That week, six hundred Americans made *aliya*. The brink of Armageddon dissolved into morning traffic.



“Many were the miracles You performed long ago, at night,” we sing only once a year at the close of the first Seder. “Night after miraculous night draw near the day that will be neither day nor night. Highest One, make known that day is Yours and also night. Appoint watchmen for Your city all day long and all night. Light up like daylight the darkness of night.” The white flame of rockets and their interceptors made night into day, and then the dawn arrived.



These are the miracles of this war that tighten my faith when it comes loose at the edges. Every time I divide into component parts a difficult event that jolts my belief, I find faith and gratitude in the pieces. Atomizing a miracle into more miracles is a Jewish strategy to protect what we treasure most.

Daily miracles, too, are my spiritual shield; they frame a melancholy day with piety and affirm my commitments. I consume them like candy, a bit of sweetness to dampen the sour taste of the news. “The words of a whisperer,” I read in Proverbs, “are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.”<sup>2</sup>

Reliance on miracles, however, is not a military strategy. It can make us complacent.



It is this bedrock of faith that fortified the author of Psalm 27; his belief was there before battle so it would be there after battle. He was able to see God’s hand through the worst because he had seen God’s hand in his life through the best – before he saw the face of the enemy. The psalmist looked for God on the battlefield and then found God everywhere. The minor and major battle victories were stamped with God’s outstretched arms. But then maybe the psalmist saw God in the losses, too. God hovered above the shoulders of an injured young soldier who carried the body of his bloody commander for miles until relief came.



Faith is harder for the unlucky ones, and there are, in this war, so many unlucky ones. The person who grabbed a last-minute ride to the Nova Festival for the weekend. Why not? The relatives who went to Kissufim for the holiday and did not come back.



My strength stumbles and falls, then rises high, then falls again. It oscillates. In every covenantal relationship, there are moments of distance and intimacy. I try to channel the psalmist to steady the pulse of faith.



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*“One thing I ask of the Lord, only that do I seek: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord... He will shelter me in His pavilion on an evil day, grant me the protection of His tent, raise me high upon a rock” (Ps. 27:4–5).*



Through the haze of danger, the psalmist asks for only one thing: God’s shelter.

In my mind, I outline the pastel painting on the concrete wall of a shelter I saw in Kfar Aza. It might have been a butterfly; it is covered in bullet holes.

That happy butterfly could not deceive nursery children from the shelter’s function; those children in Kfar Aza were used to running into shelters. One grenade after another was thrown into those shelters. God will shelter us in His pavilion on an evil day, the psalmist promised. Just not on that day.



*“Do not subject me to the will of my foes, for false witnesses and unjust accusers have appeared against me” (Ps. 27:12).*



Ours is a history of unjust accusers. Do not subject me to the will of my foes, God. Their accusations spill out like daggers on pavement, clattering and threatening.

Sometimes our accusers have a point. They are not always wrong. Maybe we use too much force. Maybe we can only see our own suffering. Maybe we stopped caring about their children. Maybe we tolerate violent extremists in the government and radicals who set fire to their cars and villages. If we cannot stay human, we betray God. “Never once have I seen anything remotely resembling joy when we have killed



terrorists,” writes a reservist this year. “It’s not an accomplishment, just a necessity.”<sup>3</sup>

We do not listen even when the accusers speak the truth because they have accused us falsely so many times. We do not trust them. We defend ourselves instead. Golda knew. “When peace comes,” she said, “we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons.” This killing hardens our hearts more than the twenty times that Pharaoh’s heart was hardened in the Exodus. Wars are not won with soft hearts.



How soft is God’s heart?



I wrote this book to articulate some of the struggles of faith that people have shared with me who are not living in Israel during this conflict. They feel both part of this war and apart from it. I wrote it in the first person because it felt more genuine to use my own voice and not speak for anyone else as I wonder out loud how soft God’s heart is. It is hard to maintain a sacred heart in the throes of violence to my people and the devastation on all sides of this long, ugly war. I tried to write my way to that sacred heart.

I traveled to Israel four times during this past year. The first trip was two weeks after October 7th. The last was in August of 2024. I kept writing here and there and on the plane between here and there. I kept notes and lists almost daily. I am the child of a child survivor. Everything must be documented. We are charged to bear witness.

On these pages, I thread newspaper accounts and narratives from books on war into short passages that interpret Jewish texts through the lens of the current situation. Many in Israel have written and will write their

eyewitness accounts. Fewer have considered how this war has changed Diaspora Jewry. I want to trace the internal weather I observed as we counted the days and offer fragments of anguish and hope over the course of one year of war on land and a continuous battle of faith inside the mind. Recency bias makes us forget the trajectory of the war and its phases. We are all victims of memory loss.



There are already dozens of books in Israel on the war: stories of released hostages, memoirs of soldiers, musings of parents and politicians. Outside of Israel, the war had a hold on Diaspora Jewry that came with immense heartache. The narrative abroad was laced with a different but related hate. This is a story that must also be told.



It seems at times that we are one family with an ocean between us. Love hovers over the water as God did at the beginning of creation. At other times, it seems like the Israeli part of this family denies us true entry. We are not entitled to dramatic feelings of loss and pain because we do not live in Israel, we who do not serve in its army or pay its taxes, financial or emotional.

Consider a visitor to the home of a mourner who cries more than the mourner while others look on at this vicarious display. Then again, we cannot judge the strength of anyone's feelings during war. Some people feel things more deeply regardless of where they live. Some live side by side with terror but don't allow vulnerability to seep in or leak out as one day blurs into the next.



Is it a blessing or a curse to feel things deeply?



As I write this, Israel is still at war. It could easily be the fifty-ninth day or the 211th day. Or the 365th day. I mark the days throughout these essays in pursuit of a durable faith.

In the past twenty-five days alone, Israel has killed major architects of terror and what looks like most of a Hamas leadership organizational chart. I sit in the United States or in Jerusalem. The country anxiously awaits reprisals. The North of Israel is heating up. Hezbollah targeted the Druze town of Majdel Shams. Twelve children playing soccer were killed by explosives. There were threats and retaliation for the retaliation. It's hard to determine who started what. Maybe it doesn't even matter. Every side seeks a pretext for violence.

As one retaliation begets another, we rip off days from the calendar. One confident negotiator is optimistic. We are not fooled. We are tired and sad. We are saddened by the happy faces of soldiers, smiling into our eyes from the newspapers when they are already dead.



The negotiators' objectives are too grand and are, therefore, unrealistic: to achieve an end, to eradicate terror, to uphold democracy in the Middle East, to give a beleaguered stateless people their own home, to protect a people who spent two thousand years away from home. Right now, I'd settle for a normal day when so little happens that I am looking for something to do. I want to be bored.



"If your enemy falls, do not exult; if he trips, let your heart not rejoice" (Prov. 24:17). We cringe at October 7th's photos of Palestinian triumph. A shawarma joint called October 7th opened in Kerak, Jordan. In what world is a restaurant named after a massacre? "The date October 7th is an honorable date and will remain engraved in our hearts forever," said its owner when he caved to political pressure to change the name. "I am proud of myself and proud that I shook the fragile entity [Israel]"

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by using the name of a shawarma restaurant and struck terror in their hearts..."<sup>4</sup> The cheering chipped away at our faith in the Other. We balk at the jubilant cries for an intifada on American campuses and lose faith in higher education.

But we believe in humanity and in higher education, so we continue the good fight.



One journalist claims Israel is actually in five wars, one to the South, one to the North, one metaphoric, and one ideological. The last war is internal: between progressive Jews in Israel and the Diaspora and those who are politically to the right.<sup>5</sup> Winning one war is no guarantee of victory in another.



*On Your behalf, my heart says: "Seek My face!" O Lord, I seek Your face. Do not hide Your face from me; do not thrust aside Your servant in anger; You have ever been my help. Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, O God, my deliverer. (Ps. 27:8–9)*

I feel angry and confused, but I will continue to seek Your face the way I seek the face of my husband in an airport when he picks me up. My attention darts from person to person. That is not him. Is it him from the back? No. Then I see his familiar silhouette, and my body relaxes into a smile. The noise and movement of strangers gives way to comfort and belonging. That is what I seek in God's face. Comfort and belonging. And protection.

From October 7th until now, I find myself, often at dawn, asking how to think and act in this time of inhumanity. These musings are not chronological; they are products of a disordered mind during war, a period of hell I pray will never be repeated. They interweave classical Jewish sources and rituals with the events of the day because the haunting

## *Morning Has Broken*

sense of oppression and battle fatigue trails me like a shadow from the beginning of time. I would rather bring my anger to God than hide it from God. A covenantal relationship demands that I bring to God the totality of myself.



*“Look to the Lord; be strong and of good courage! O look to the Lord!” (Ps. 27:14).*

# Morning Has Broken

**H**amas terrorists started this war early in the morning as they breached the barrier between Gaza and the Gaza Envelope. “Envelope” is a strange word, implying embrace, which is what these communities did. They embraced the border. Seventy thousand Israelis hugged the border of hatred that surged one October morning like a tsunami of devastation over a wall that was no longer a wall.



Morning has broken. Mourning has broken. Morning is broken.



*“In the morning, you will say, ‘Oh, that it were evening!’ And in the evening, you will say, ‘Oh, that it were morning!’ because of the fear that terrifies your heart and because of the sight which your eyes see” (Deut. 28:67).*



That Simchat Torah morning, an officer in the reserves got a phone call. There was panic and danger and not enough military nearby. He grabbed his handgun and, as he left his Jerusalem neighborhood, thought of

another crazy morning. He was seventeen and heading to school when he saw a school bus packed with children traveling to Yad Vashem. He hid among the bags on the back of the bus until the principal caught him missing school and angrily called the student's father. But how can you argue with a teenager who *wants* to visit a Holocaust museum?

The young man stood his ground. He would not take a taxi back to school. That day, he learned about Jewish suffering in concentration camps through images of devastation. He describes that morning as the beginning of his journey to Jewish identity.

Years later, this young man knew he had to drive into danger on October 7th. He stopped his car in the desert and walked to the burnt houses of Kibbutz Be'eri, thinking immediately about the chimneys of Auschwitz. In the light of the day, he entered the bleakest of nights. He wrestled a ceramic vest and a weapon from a dead man who had tried to defend the kibbutz.



The strange thing about Holocaust museums is that they are designed to take visitors back to a space and time they never wanted to be in in the first place.



When I was seventeen, I began my gap year in Israel. My mother came to visit, and I took her, a child survivor from a village in the south of Poland who was hidden in an orphanage in Lublin, to Yad Vashem. After a few minutes in a dark corridor limned with concentration camp photos, she asked to leave. There was a bench outside not far from an exit and, uncharacteristically, she lay flat on it in the hot Near Eastern sun for a long time. Behind her was a shining Jerusalem hilltop covered in apartment buildings and schools. Look, Mom, I wanted to say. There is so much new life behind you. Instead, I honored her pain and waited in the sunlight in silence.



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The reservist from Jerusalem, who had taken a handgun and a ceramic vest from a man who died defending the kibbutz, collapsed two mornings into one. Something was shifting inside him. “I feel that, as a nation, we are on the cusp of cultivating a new leadership and a new language. I believe our aspirations are greater than just a survival instinct.” Survival alone is not enough. “I thought of my children, ages six and four, and I realized it was possible I might never see them again. If I did not survive, they would lose their father and a piece of themselves. But I also knew that they would preserve the identity and values that I was fighting for with my life.”<sup>6</sup>



Faith is the belief that a new morning will eclipse the night. The belief that morning will follow night is an act of emotional resilience.



Day after day during this war, I have recited Psalm 130 alone and in community as I’ve waited for the morning after: “My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.” The refrain heightens the intensity of the waiting. A watchman’s job is to wait for the morning when his shift ends. But our shift never ends because we must always stay vigilant. My friend tells me that her young daughters in a school in America now require a guard to move from school to the neighborhood park. What if someone sees that these children are Jewish? What if? Always – what if?

The lack of vigilance has caused endless misery. Sometimes we have to wait a long time for the morning. Sometimes it feels like the waiting will last forever.

The morning will come. I convince myself.





“O Lord, hear my voice in the morning” (Ps. 5:4). Before the world encroaches, the morning allows me to put yesterday’s woes behind and entertain the possibility of newness. It allows me to fall in love with the world again and hope that God falls in love with us again: “Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love,” the psalmist prays (Ps. 143:8).

Even in Jeremiah’s catalogue of doom, morning love blooms: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness” (Lam. 3:22–23). The morning revives my vigor and belief: “I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning” (Ps. 59:16). This *chesed*, this steadfast love, makes sense in the morning. We regard the internal bruises of late-night arguments, even crises, differently in the tender haze of daybreak.



At night, one verse permits me to rest that’s from another psalm I’ve said dozens of times this year: “See, the guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers” (Ps. 121:4). Danger lurks in the night. The time difference between Israel and the United States is a distancing mechanism that keeps Diaspora Jews slightly out of step with Israel. We wake up not knowing what has happened there for a few hours.

In three places, the sages of the Talmud ask, “Does God sleep?”<sup>7</sup> Lately, I’ve wondered if God is sleeping. Stay awake, I beg God, “when the Jewish people are in a state of suffering.”

I am comforted by the words of my teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: Prayer, he wrote, “gives sacred space to the tears that otherwise would have nowhere to go.”<sup>8</sup> Across the abyss, I reach out to God – the Guardian of Israel who neither sleeps nor slumbers. These are my very last words that put the distractions of the day to bed as I prepare for the darkness of night’s uncertainty.



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But significant events occur at the crack of dawn. Abraham saddled his donkey for the greatest challenge of his life (Gen. 19:27). Jacob rose from his ladder dream of angels and built an altar to God (Gen. 28:18). Moses built an altar at the bottom of Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:4), and gave the Ten Commandments a second time in the morning (Ex. 34:4). When Joshua was poised to cross the Jordan River and usher the Israelites to the Promised Land, he arose early in the morning (Josh. 3:1). In the days of the Judges, Gideon woke up early to test God's word (Judg. 6:38), and Hannah rose up early to worship God and beg for a son (I Sam. 1:19).



Every morning is like the very first morning.



The morning after this war, we will start living joyfully again, I reassure myself.



We are a morning people. Our faith is streaked in gold and pink across the heavens as dawn breaks. The sunrise looks beautiful even during catastrophes; in this broken world, a scrap of beauty always remains. Sometimes, even a skyful.



*"Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:6).*