



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

Night Seven: Tunnel Vision—From Darkness to Light **Ilana Gimpelevich, Class of 2026**

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In Israel, the events of October 7th are known as the Dark Shabbat. In this kind of darkness, blackness is palpable, ready to swallow one whole, suck one in, absorb, make disappear. Like a black hole, the unknown world of evil tunnels pulls one in. The tunnels merge with the black hole of the internet, and the never-ending cycle of the news. From the antisemitic incidents to the biased press treatment, from the outrageous claims to the outrageous denials, one is left with a sense that nothing is certain, nothing is known. Nothing is black and white, and yet everyone claims that it is. The acquaintances are illusory, shifting shapes, using the language that has multiple meanings, making it opaque. The friends morph into foes or bystanders. The obvious pain and objective truth are cloaked in the heavy language of “buts” and asterisks.

The darkness of October gives way to November. The clocks change and now the darkness inches closer, moving up by an hour, swallowing time and the will to go on. The realities on the ground in Israel dash the hopes of a quick and swift operation and instead lead to molasses-slow crawl of a protracted operation. The gray uncertainty grows: where is Hamas? Where are the remaining hostages? Who will support Israel? Who will betray her? How many fronts will it have to fight on? When will the reservists see their families? How many casualties will it take to crush Hamas? How long will it take?

This enveloping darkness permeates everything. Shortly after the horrific attack of October 7th, I find myself plunging into the waters of the mikvah. The water feels strange, swallowing me whole in its murky depth. Was it only a month ago that I entered similar waters and experienced them as a hug?

The sensation is foreign. Darkness is closing in from all directions. The terror committed against my people coupled with the antisemitic howls of indignation feel like a plot of a horror movie, like a bad dream from which one is unable to wake up. I am experiencing tunnel vision, centered on the bloodied but beating heart of my nation.

I do not consider myself to be the praying type. My preferred mode of connecting with the Divine is through careful study of text, logical deductions and philosophical reasoning. The words of prayer feel rote. Tehillim seem like someone else's sublime poetry that I cannot quite grasp in my fingers. Yet I find myself uttering spontaneous prayers: for the hostages, for the soldiers, for the survivors, for the families left to cope with a country at war and a spouse at the front lines. I have a direct line running straight to the Divine about the concerns of my fellow Jews in Israel.

A few weeks have passed; I am taking a train in Israel. The sky is dark with rain clouds, and I worry about the soldiers. How are they, stationed in the mud? How are the hostages, deep underground in the tunnels? But this Israeli rain is unlike the autumnal rain of the Diaspora, where it is associated with cessation of life and hibernation. This is the rain that we pray for, the life-giving rain that nourishes the soil and greens everything in sight. I find myself whispering that may this rain be a blessing, at the right time.

As I look over the platform, the clouds part. It is still raining next to me, but in the distance, over the hills, a bright spot appears. Like a solitary candle on the first night of Hanukkah, that spot lightens up the terrain. There is still hope.

The Hebrew word for hope is tikvah. The national anthem of Israel, Hatikvah, is based on the ancient hope that we will all be restored to Zion and will have sovereignty over this land.

Suddenly the connection between darkness and light, between water and hope, becomes clear. Jeremiah refers to God as Mikveh Yisrael, the Purifier of Israel, but also its Hope. Just as the waters of the mikvah closing over my head symbolically purify, so does God. I am transported back to being surrounded by the waters of hope. I find myself closing my eyes and praying that a direct tunnel of light pierces the darkness and leads straight to the hostages. The dark tunnel recedes and the hostages emerge, drawn by the light. Their exit generates its own illumination. This great light chases away the darkness, shines light into the shadows, and produces clarity. Hillel declares with regard to the Hanukkah lights that we add more candles every night and let the illumination grow. Hillel was not held hostage, but he understood the psychology



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necessary for the Jewish survival and continuity. Hillel knew that the small flame of hope had to grow every night until the calendar itself shifts through the winter solstice, and the sunshine increases.

I am following in the footsteps of Hillel. Hope for Israel fills my chest: hope for this stubborn little country, hope for its stiff-necked people, hope for this sky and this rain, abundantly watering the crops. Hope for the sun to shine through. And hope for those in captivity to emerge into the great light.

So we continue to hope that we, the Jewish people, can emerge feeling proud, with our heads held high. For far too long, Jews have had to bend over backwards to justify our existence and accommodate others' discomfort with our presence. The Hamas kidnappings made it clear that no matter how small we make ourselves by choosing to live in the shadows, they will come for us and find us. We might as well live our full lives in the sunshine.

Ilana Gimpelevich is a lifelong learner and educator, always open to new fields of knowledge. Originally from Kishinev, Moldova, she holds a BA in Biochemistry (YU) and a Masters in Structural Biology (NYU). She is a founding member of New Toco Shul in Atlanta, GA. Currently residing in Richmond, VA, Ilana is involved in adult programming at Keneseth Beth Israel. She started an innovative multigenerational program, Oreg, which combines her two passions of hands-on craftsmanship with Torah learning.