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Unwavering Spirit-ed1-ce

Searching for the Eternal Light Switch

By Julie Pelc

In every Jewish sanctuary, above the holy ark cradling the velvety Torah scrolls, hangs an eternal light, a *ner tamid*. Shining above us, it symbolizes God, and is always lit. Once, when I entered a darkened synagogue with one of my bat mitzvah students on an ordinary weekday, we felt our way around, touching every wall in the sanctuary, looking for the light switch, worried that we might accidentally turn off that which is meant to shine eternally. “The eternal light switch -- it must exist,” I mused.

A few months later, without warning, a brain aneurysm burst in my cerebellum. I had just returned from my student pulpit, where I was a part-time rabbi for a small congregation in Lubbock, Texas.

During the eight-hour procedure that followed, I can only imagine my parents’ terror as they soared over the west coast of the United States, held aloft by the miracle of modern technology, while I was in neurosurgery, my cranium split open after a blood vessel had burst.

Later, I asked no one in particular, “Where the hell is the eternal light now?” Perhaps there is no light? No switch? I’m studying to be a rabbi; shouldn’t I know why bad things happen to good people?

Now, nearly three years later, I imagine my ordination. Each future rabbi chooses a verse in the Hebrew Bible to which his or her particular Torah will be rolled. Even

before the aneurysm, before I understood how prophetic my verse was, I knew it would be “Choose life!” It is the most difficult challenge in the Torah. Choosing life means trying to live life with a special kind of passion and commitment to all that is vibrant and absurd and painful and passionate, even when it makes us cry. To choose life presupposes that this choice is ours to make, that we do have some control over the quality and reality of our own lives.

I am hardly saying that my journey with God, my struggle with faith or my understanding of why bad things happen to good people are resolved. I am not saying that I don't still hurt, I am not still angry, that I don't still question. I am saying that today I can see a bigger picture, today I see that God has set before us life and prosperity, death and adversity. And, in the face of *all of it*, in the very midst of a crisis, in fact, we are commanded, we are asked, we are begged, “Choose Life.”

Choosing life is about seeing life as it is in its fullness: seeing the blessing and the curse are constant presences in the realities of our own lives. It is about turning towards God again even when we are angry and hurt and betrayed, so that God might bring us back from the ends of the earth, in love. And, we are reminded that *this is not too hard for us*. This difficult, long, winding road of healing is within our reach.

We received our collective name, Yisrael, precisely because we struggle, not despite our struggle. We, the Children of Israel, are God wrestlers. We question and fight, and while we may emerge bruised and limping, we also emerge blessed.

As I move toward the ark and the eternal light above it on the morning of my ordination ceremony this May, my thesis advisor will cradle my Torah scroll in her arms

and I will walk beside her toward my future as a rabbi, knowing that I will be choosing in every moment.

Bio TK