

Finding Hope and Meaning in Dark Times¹

By Rabbi Michele Brand Medwin, D.Min.

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This has been a hard year. A very hard year. There is continuous turmoil on the national level. Every time you turn on the T.V. there is more ‘breaking news.’ Mother nature has not been kind to us, floods, blizzards, freezing temperatures, heat waves, wild fires. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains what it feels like - “It is like the man sitting on the deck of the Titanic with a glass of whisky in his hand saying, “I know I asked for ice but this is ridiculous.”

For our community, we have lost a dear friend, Bonnie Barnofsky, way too early. Many of us have also lost family members and close friends.

There are others who have been diagnosed with serious illness or disease, or experiencing the overall wear and tear on the body. For some, minds work but, bodies don’t want to go along. And for others, their minds are not working as well as they used to, even if the body seems to keep going. We seem to have more appointments on our calendars with doctors than with friends.

For some, finding enough money for the basics, can be a challenge.

Personally, this has been a year of mourning for my mom. At the same time we have watched Steve’s parents deteriorate and age before our eyes. I am one of those who has spent more days that I would like, going back and forth to doctors and specialists, and still no official diagnoses. And I know many of you have similar experiences.

SO HOW DO WE KEEP GOING? How do we move forward into the future without disappointment, frustration and fear. Sometimes things seem so hopeless. What keeps us going when on some days we feel like just crawling into bed, covering ourselves with a blanket, and not getting out.

We can learn from Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor. His book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, tells the story of how he survived the Holocaust emotionally by finding personal meaning in the experience. This gave him the will to live through it. He went on to establish a new school of psychotherapy called logotherapy, based on the idea that man’s underlying motivator in life is a “will to meaning,” even in the most difficult of circumstances. Frankl’s experience taught him that life **can** be meaningful and fulfilling even in the midst of the harshest conditions.

¹ From Viktor Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

Last year I did a counseling internship for Jewish Family Service in Binghamton for people who were home bound. One client had a severe personality disorder that made it hard for her to function in relation to other people. We met in her den. It was filled with bookcases containing books about the Holocaust. On the walls were posters from Holocaust related movies. I asked her if she had lost many family members to Hitler. She said, "Maybe a few distant relatives but I don't really know anything about them." Puzzled, I asked, "This room seems to be dedicated to the Holocaust." She explained that she has become somewhat of an expert. Thinking about the Holocaust helps to put her life in perspective. She told me, "As bad as my life is, it isn't as bad as those who suffered under the Nazis."

We usually can't change the things that cause suffering such as decline in health, loss of a loved one, loss of function, or frustration with the world, but we can change how we **think** about it and how we respond to it. According to Frankl finding for meaning and purpose can make the difference.

Frankl worked as a physician in the camps. He did all he could to help those who fell ill and were brought to the infirmary. Frankl began to see a pattern as he focused on who survived and who didn't. Two patients with the same illness could have very different outcomes. The difference was that those who survived had a reason to live. Some made it their mission to survive

to tell the story to the world.

For others it was for family members who they hoped were still alive.

Ann Frank survived for a while in the concentration camp with her sister.

Their mother had died. She thought their father had also died. She and her sister were both sick with typhoid. Ann hung in there to keep her sister going. Once her sister died from the disease, Ann died shortly afterwards. She gave up on life because she had nothing left to live for.

He learned it was possible to practice the art of **living**, even in a concentration camp. His observations taught him to be grateful for the "smallest of mercies." Frankl says if a person can preserve a sense of spiritual freedom even in terrible conditions, they can find a way to survive, even thrive.

You may say, " Yes, I am suffering, but certainly not like those in the Holocaust. Frankl says it doesn't matter. Any type of suffering completely fills the human soul and mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or small.

Though we think life is a quest for pleasure, it really is a quest for meaning.. Frankl explained that we always have the freedom to find meaning through positive attitudes even in apparently meaningless situations. For example, an elderly, depressed patient who could not overcome the loss of his wife was helped by the following conversation with Frankl:

Frankl asked "What would have happened if you had died first, and your wife would have had to survive you."

"Oh," replied the patient, "for her this would have been terrible; how she would have suffered!"

Frankl continued, "You see such a suffering has been spared her; and it is you who have spared her this suffering; but now, you have to pay for it by surviving her and mourning her." The man said no word, but shook Frankl's hand and calmly left his office (Frankl, 1992).

Frankl helped his clients re-orient toward the meaning of life. Having been created in the image of God, we each have a unique and specific meaning to our lives that can be fulfilled only by ourselves. That purpose may change over time, but no matter what age we are, we should search for what our purpose is at that moment.

How can we do this? We can find meaning in these areas of life:

- in work or doing something significant
- in love (caring for another person)
- and in courage (during difficult times).

Where in these areas of life do you find meaning? Can you think of ways to add meaning to you life in one of these categories that you hadn't though of?

It is all about attitude. How do you view the passing days? Positively or negatively. The person who is positive is able to see each day as a reflection on

the days he has already lived. He feels he has already lived life to the fullest. Extra days are a bonus. A positive attitude enables a person to endure suffering and disappointment as well as enhance enjoyment and satisfaction.

On the other hand, a negative attitude intensifies pain and deepens disappointment. How do we make that turn then, from negative to positive?

The Psalmist cried out to God:

מִן-הַמִּצָּר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה עֲנֵנִי בַמְרוֹחַב יְהוָה

From the narrow place I called to God

who answered me with the Divine expanse.

God answered and brought me relief. (Psalm 118:5)

How did God bring relief? By showing the Psalmist that he has a purpose, that each one of us was created for a purpose. Are you are having trouble figuring out what your purpose is now, what can give you meaning in your life? I encourage you to use the rest of the day, an year, to reach inward, to really listen to your soul, which is really God speaking directly to you. This can help you to realize what your purpose on earth for the coming year will be.