

The Rebbetzin and The Thespian

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

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Four words. It was four words that made Steven Hill famous, and four words that changed his life. Anyone who viewed the original series “Mission Impossible” remembers the tape played at the beginning of each episode, saying “Good Morning, Mr. Phelps” to the character played by Peter Graves. Originally, however, that recording said “Good Morning, Mr. Briggs,” to the character Dan Briggs, played by Steven Hill, who passed away this week at the age of 94. Hill was best known in Hollywood for the many roles he played in television and movies; in the Jewish world, he was known for being a *baal teshuvah* who embraced traditional Judaism at the height of his career. His return to Judaism came about because of another four words. In 1961, he appeared in the play *A Far Country*, portraying Sigmund Freud. This experience had a profound effect on Hill's later life, because in one scene, a patient screams at Freud, "You are a Jew!" This happened every week, nine times a week, and it caused Hill to think about his life.

"In the pause that followed I would think, 'What about this?' I slowly became aware that there was something more profound going on in the world than just plays and movies and TV shows. I was provoked to explore my religion."

He became a disciple of the previous Skverer Rebbe, Rav Yaakov Yosef Twersky, who encouraged him to continue acting, and while his observance led to an 11 year career hiatus, he returned to the screen for a number of successful roles, including that of Adam Schiff, the hardbitten and pragmatic DA on Law and Order.

The same day that Steven Hill passed away, another renowned Jewish mentor returned her soul to the creator- Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis. Rebbetzin Jungreis was a Hungarian Holocaust survivor who was saved, together with her entire family, by being transferred on the Kastner Train to Switzerland. In 1947, she married her distant cousin, a Holocaust survivor named Rabbi Meshullam Jungreis, and they founded Congregation Ohr HaTorah in North Woodmere, New York. As a survivor of the Holocaust, Rebbetzin Jungreis was determined to do devote her life to “combating the spiritual Holocaust that was occurring in the United States,” a drive that led her to found the Hineni organization in 1973. Rebbetzin Jungreis’s talks, delivered at Congregation Kehillath Jeshurun on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, draw capacity crowds, and she became like a *chassidische Rebbe* for her many followers, who often sought her blessings. Hundreds of couples met at Hineni events, and thousands of people were moved by Rebbetzin Jungreis’s impassioned speeches, delivered in her Hungarian lilt in enormous venues around the world, to reconnect with their Jewish heritage.

The passing of two notable and high profile Torah Jews on the same day should give us pause, and I’ve been reflecting on what these dual passings

mean for the Jewish people, and what message we can learn today, as we *bentch* the month of Elul.

Today, we read the second of a series of seven *Haftarot* known as the *שבועה לדחמתא*, the seven *Haftarot* of consolation. These are seven *Haftarot* with upbeat themes of comfort and joy read in the seven weeks between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashana. The question raised by the *Shiva Denechemta* is simple: Why are there so many prophecies of consolation? At some point, it becomes redundant and the consolation should lose its potency!

The Abravanel, in his commentary on the late prophets, explains that these prophecies were necessary so that the Jews would not despair of exile, despite its length and severity. He detailed the doubts harbored by the nation that necessitated the numerous comforting prophecies, including:

1. The Jewish people were decreasing in number and were rapidly assimilating in the diaspora.
2. They were guests in other kingdoms and lacked sovereignty of their own.
3. They were worried that their sins were a permanent obstacle to redemption

These prophecies reassured the Jewish people multiple times that exile is a period of the atonement of sin, and that the return to Jerusalem will happen

as a result of the conclusion of sufficient punishment. With it will come revenge on the nations that have persecuted us, the ingathering of the exiles and the renewal of the Davidic dynasty.

This raises another question, though. Why do we have to read *all* of these prophecies, and why now? Yes, this is the period after Tisha B'Av. We've had our fun on Shabbos Nachamu, and now it's Shabbos Mevarchim Elul. It's time to get serious, not comfortable!

Perhaps we can suggest that it is necessary to read these prophecies now, because they are not just about comfort, in the aftermath of Tisha B'Av. They are about taking us gradually from Tisha B'Av through Rosh Hashanah. If we were to have just one week of comfort and then stop, or go right into Rosh Hashanah, we wouldn't be able to withstand that kind of change. How can we go from a moment of God's utmost concealment immediately to a time when he sits on His throne of judgement? We need these Haftaros as way of preparing us, paving the way for the experience of Teshuvah well before the season is upon us. Moreover, the purpose of these prophecies was to convince the Jewish people to envision a future that is different from the one they envisioned for themselves. In their mind, God had forsaken them and was leaving them to the whims of other nations while they slowly withered away. Teaching them about His love, and about the purpose of exile, was a way of showing that there is *always* a different ending, and that the trajectory of our lives does not have a preordained or foregone conclusion. That's what *teshuvah* is about, isn't it? It means that

the mistakes we have made until now don't define us, and that our past negative performance is no guarantee of future results.

In reflecting on the lives of Steven Hill and Rebbetzin Jungreis, there are some fascinating parallels. Steven Hill was a *baal teshuvah* before the *teshuvah* movement took off. In a hesped delivered at his funeral, Rabbi Mayer Schiller said that Steven Hill's first wife divorced him because she thought his stirring interest in Judaism represented incipient mental illness! It took the rest of his life to mend his relationship with his four children from his first marriage, and he succeeded with three of them. If Steven Hill returned to Judaism before it was "fashionable," Rebbetzin Jungreis was returning *others* to Judaism before *outreach* was a buzzword and *keiruv* was a profession. Aside from Chabad, there were almost no organizations or professionals dedicated to Jewish outreach in the 1970s, certainly none with women serving in active leadership roles. In the same way that the prophets of comfort were giving messages that were ahead of their time, the lives of Steven Hill and Rebbetzin Jungreis spoke to initiatives and values way ahead of theirs. More than that, though, the lives of these two remarkable individuals speak to the message of Shabbos Mevarchim Elul. For an actor to "make it" in Hollywood despite being an observant Jew is nearly unheard of, and for an actor who sacrificed so much for his spiritual life to find a slice of life that can satisfy both is exceedingly difficult. Yet Steven Hill rewrote his script spectacularly well, leaving behind a rich body of work but

also generations of descendants who are Torah Jews. For a Holocaust survivor with a foreign accent to tap into the *zeitgeist* of American society in the freewheeling 1970s and beyond is certainly counterintuitive, but Rebbetzin Jungreis didn't buy that narrative. With her genuineness and honesty (and, in some cases, controversial frankness) she rewrote the script and was able to touch the souls of countless people throughout the world.

Abbie and Adam, it is so special that you and your wonderful families have decided to share with us the latter half of your *sheva brachos* celebration. I think that marriage is one of the ultimate expressions of this theme of *teshuvah*. A cynical wag might interpret that statement to mean that now that you are married, you will have numerous opportunities to apologize, grovel and repent for your manifold interpersonal failings, of which your spouse is the primary victim- but that's not what I mean. Marriage is an expression of *teshuvah* because it means you are rewriting the script of your individual lives and including another remarkable person in it. Nothing is foregone, and you have the chance to fashion a life together totally different from the lives you lived alone. Certainly, your individual lives have been extraordinary, filled with learning, communal dedication and passion for Jewish causes. But anyone who has seen you together know what a remarkable couple you are- deeply dedicated to one another, highly intelligent and learned, and fiercely principled. May the path your life takes together be one of *teshuvah*- a path of growth and success, joy and comfort in one another. May we all learn this message as we *bentch* the month of Elul. As we begin the gradually intensifying march toward Rosh Hashanah,

and as we enter the *teshuvah* season in earnest, let us think ahead of our times. It is not too late to make meaningful spiritual and interpersonal changes in our lives changes as we go into Elul- our conclusion is not foregone, and we are not far gone.