

Commentary

FEBRUARY 2021 JUDAISM

Israel's Vaccine Triumph

Jewish Commentary

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

WE HAVE DISCOVERED HOW TO HIT THE JEWS WHERE THEY ARE THE most vulnerable. The Jews love life, so that is what we shall take away from them. We are going to win, because we love death, and they love life.” So proclaimed Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah. His pathetic prediction aside, Nasrallah had Jews pegged pretty well; we do love life so. The Hebrew word for life, *chayim*, is the essence of our aspiration on the High Holy Days: We beseech Almighty God, the *melekh chafetz ba-chayim*, the king who desires life, to remember us for life, and to write us in the *sefer ha-chayim*, the book of life. And of course, as many Gentiles (and not a few Jews, alas) learned from *Fiddler on the Roof*, the traditional toast of Jews at moments of celebration is *l’chayim*: to life.

And yet, Tevye’s translation notwithstanding, the standard rendering of *l’chayim* is not exactly correct. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted, *chayim* in Hebrew exists only in the plural, so technically *l’chayim* could be understood as toasting “to lives.” The meaning, perhaps, is that life becomes truly meaningful when it is shared, when it is about something larger than ourselves: This, for Jews, is most fully realized in the joining of generations. We do indeed toast *l’chayim*, but we do so at the

circumcisions of our sons and at the weddings of our daughters. What we are celebrating is not our own atomistic existence, but rather the linking of past and posterity.



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