**“Fifty Years Later: The Yom Kippur War Revisited”**

Before charging into battle, officers in the Israeli Army are known to shout something that runs contrary to all other militaries in the world, something that, if things do not go as planned, could endanger the entire command structure around them, and yet, still they shout: “Acharai/After Me.”

The question is: If it is so dangerous, potentially leaving their subordinates, without leadership, why do they do it?

They do so because it sends a message to everyone around them that: I will not ask you to do anything that I would not do myself, that your blood is just as sacred as mine, that the fate of our mission lies in each and everyone one of our hands, and that you matter to me.

Fifty years ago, on Yom Kippur Day of 1973, the cry of “Acharai” resounded for a small battalion of troops and tanks stationed in the closest outpost to Syria in the Golan Heights, Outpost 107. As war broke out that morning, the soldiers were under heavy fire, destroying most of the outposts' positions and even their supply of drinking water. While IDF tanks managed to hold them off, destroying several Syrian tanks, their ammunition was soon exhausted, leaving the nineteen remaining troops completely outnumbered and cut off from the rest of the army. Several days into the war, their rations were dangerously low. Worse yet, they were all that stood in the way of the Syrian tanks having a direct path to Tel Aviv.

In the hill above them, there were 110 tanks, a full armored division. Their commanding officer, Elimelech, radioed for air support. Negative, he was told. Then, he radioed for armor support. Again, the response was negative. Then, he radioed for artillery support. Negative, he was told once more.

*“Zeh Avood*, all is lost,” many of the troops said, slumping into their bunkers. One IDF soldier was so desperate he carved the names of all nineteen men on a shell casing, as a way of remembering them after the war was over.

Yossi Zadok, a Golani corporal, stood with his bazooka in hand unsure of how to proceed. He had never been considered a great shot with a bazooka, and, making matters worse, he only had a few rounds of ammunition left. Just firing the weapon alone was going to be tricky. To locate a target and fire, Yossi would have to raise his head above the top of the bunker for several seconds, leaving himself completely exposed to enemy fire. This was against protocol and perhaps suicidal. But what choice did he have? Stopping the oncoming Syrian army was an imperative to saving his country.

So, working with one of his fellow troops, a mortar man by the name of Amos, they devised a plan of action. Amos would put his helmet on top of his rifle and raise it above the top of the bunker for a few seconds to see what the Syrian response would be. If they received fire back, they would move to another spot. If it was clear, Yossi would prepare his bazooka and shoot. Taking a deep breath, the two beleaguered soldiers prayed.

Amos raised his helmet and waited. Nothing. Yossi stood and fired, scoring a direct hit. They did this several more times, each time taking down a tank. When they ran out of bazooka rounds, they used the only thing left at their disposal - phosphorus, a chemical meant to mark a tank, not destroy it. Amazingly, it worked, scaring another group of Syrians out of their tank thinking it was on fire.

In the end, all nineteen troops survived. Yossi was the only one injured, but he, thankfully, recovered a few months later. After more than one hundred hours trapped inside a narrow bunker with little food or water, under constant enemy fire, they had managed to survive.

And, because of the bravery of the troops stationed at Outpost 107, as well as many other IDF soldiers and leaders, Israel “won” a war it had no business even surviving. “Acharai,” they had said to one another, “After me.”

But, winning and war are not things that go together very easily. Even though, In the end, Israel had secured positions deep within both Egypt and Syria, the Yom Kippur War is considered one of the biggest tragedies in modern Israel’s history. Over eleven thousand Israeli’s lost their lives, the most of any war outside of the War for Independence in 1948. And, just as importantly, the Yom Kippur War exposed the vulnerability of this small nation by the Mediterranean Sea for both itself and for its enemies.

I was born just a few weeks after the ceasefire, and, thus grew up, in the shadow of the Yom Kippur War. Religious school teacher after religious school teacher taught about the tragic nature of the conflict. While war is almost always tragic, this was one was all the more so. There were few Israelis that had not suffered a loss in their own families. Golda Meir, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, nicknamed the “Iron Lady” because of her leadership during the war, resigned a few months later, disgraced by the warnings that had not been heeded right before war broke out.

Sadness gripped our Jewish homeland, a fact that even the subsequent Camp David Accords hardly lessened. Perhaps, this is best epitomized by a song by Israeli artist David Broza, the Israeli Bruce Springstein, released in 1977:

*V’yiheye Tov, Yiheye Tov Ken, Lifamim Ani Nishbar, Az Ha’Layla, Ho Ha’Layla, Itach Ani Nishar*

*And, it will be good, it will be good, sometimes I break apart, thus tonight, O tonight, I will stay with you.*

Looking back now, a half a century after the outbreak of the war, the true history of that period is murky. Golda Meir, thankfully, is now being viewed as a hero, celebrated in the movie theater with a triumphant performance by Helen Mirren. And, while the tanks from the Yom Kippur War litter the landscape around both the south and north of Israel, the depression has long since lifted. That time now represents lost opportunity in the peace process with the Palestinians, and the beginning of the religious fervor that now grips even the Israeli government.

All these years later, the Yom Kippur War teaches us that our reflections change over time, that even the heaviest of defeats can be recast as triumphs, and that the human spirit is resilient. These are insights that are true not only about a historic period in our history, but in life in general. Our personal feelings about an experience are malleable, shifting as the world around us changes.

The Hebrew phrase that comes to mind is one the members of our 2023 Israel Civic Leaders trip heard quite often when we were in Israel this past February: *Zeh Musubach*, It’s Complicated! This was a phrase we used almost any time we sat down and looked at what was going on on the ground, either in present or past Israeli history.

Take for example, the fact that the war was waged on our holiest day of the year. This always struck me as intentionally cruel. Pulling soldiers from synagogues and disrupting age old rituals with military bombardments felt spiteful and perhaps cynical. But, in looking back on what actually happened, it turns out a little more complicated. That October, in addition to being the Jewish holiday season, was also in the middle of Ramadan. We were not the only ones fasting, our Muslim neighbors were as well. And, having war break out on Yom Kippur, actually helped the IDF, ensuring the roads would be clear to mobilize troops. In other words, *Zeh Mesubach!*

The phrase also works for the holiday itself. Yom Kippur is not an easy holiday to explain or observe. On it we reflect and reflect and reflect, often without coming to a definitive understanding about what we did wrong or how we would do it differently when presented with the same situation. Life is not a puzzle to be solved, but a muddy and murky river whose bottom is difficult to get to the bottom of.

On Yom Kippur, we live, not in the Acharai, but in the Acharei, the time after. If Acharai is about pushing forward into battle, Acharei is about looking back after the battle has already been waged and assessing the damage. The Torah readings that we read here in our community on Yom Kippur are from the end of the Torah, from the book of Deuteronomy. This contrasts with the Torah readings from Rosh Hashanah, which are from the beginning, in Genesis, when the story has yet to unfold. Even the traditional reading from the book of Leviticus, comes from the middle of Leviticus, in a section called “Acharei Mot,” after the death of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu.

All of us here, know full well what it means to live in the aftermath of events. We enter 5784, after the pandemic, after the massacre at Tops, and after the Blizzard of 22. This is the first Yom Kippur in four years that we have not had to plan around Covid. Our lives, for the most part, have reverted to normal. But, they, as we also must recognize, are not normal. The toll these past four years have taken on all of us is immense. It has made us more wary crowds, more on guard against attackers, more fragile than we had felt before, more moral.

All in all, the pandemic pushed more than 250 million people into poverty, and 70 million into extreme poverty. It left one billion children out of school for an entire year, and 700 million children for a year and a half. The World Bank estimates today’s students risk losing 21 trillion in annual income because of Covid 19. It has widened geographic inequalities, decreased trust in governments, worsened health outcomes, changed our labor markets, and has left us with a mental health crisis.

Who here has been left unscathed by what we have gone through? Who here has not personally witnessed the effects on our family, our friends, our community?

Thirty-two years ago in 1991, a famous Israeli singer named Yair Rosenblum, traveled up to Kibbutz Beit HaShita to help in the healing process from the Yom Kippur War. While nearly two decades had passed, the members of the kibbutz had not moved on. In 1973, there had been a little more than five hundred kibbutzniks, eleven of whom lost their lives in the war, the highest percentage of any small town in Israel. Beit HaShita, a kibbutz that produces melons and olives, is known for being defiantly secular. Only a short distance from the Valley of Tears where Yossi and Amir miraculously survived in Outpost 107, the members of the kibbutz were a cynical bunch, having lost faith, not only in God, but in Israel itself.

Yom Kippur was approaching and Rosenblum wanted to bring something that would ease their suffering and restore their faith. He turned to the liturgy of Yom Kippur itself. Recruiting the Kibbutz’s best singer, Hanoch Albalack, he organized a choir to sing the holidays' most haunting melody: The Unetaneh Tokef: “The great shofar is sounded. A still small voice is heard. The angels are dismayed,They are seized by fear and trembling As they proclaim: Behold the Day of Judgment!”

What happened next was transformative, as one of the kibbutzniks recalled in Matti Friedman’s book on Leonard Cohen called *Who By Fire*, “when Hanoch began to sing and broke open the gates of Heaven, the audience was struck dumb.” While they were secular, they knew the words of the prayer. Tears streamed down their faces. The healing process had finally begun.

In the Talmudic tractate Berachot 32b, the rabbis write about the closing of the gates at the end of Yom Kippur. While the gates of prayer shut tight, the rabbis muse, the gates of tears do not. They remain open whenever we need.

Eight years ago, I helped lead a group of Buffalonians to Israel - many of whom are in the room with us today. This was our first - three-congregational-trip between Beth Tzedek, Beth Zion, and Shir Shalom, and our first stop on the trip was Yad Lashiron, Israel’s official memorial for its armored troops. Not far from the airport, we came there jetlagged and exhausted. Wearily, we climbed in and out of the various tanks used in different wars at the entrance to the memorial. Then we gathered by a long black wall marked by names. Similar to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, included were the names of every armored soldier who lost their life. The list was organized by wars, and the longest list by far is from the Yom Kippur War. Inside the main building, a computerized database held the pictures of each and every one of these men and women. Smiling faces of Israel’s youth, the deep price of freedom, and, all of them calling out the famous battle cry: Acharai, After Me.

Here, on Yom Kippur, we live in memory of all those who charged ahead. Their stories fold and unfold in our liturgy and in our hearts. We live in the Acharai, After Me, beneficiaries of their supreme bravery. But, we also live in the Acharei, processing and reevaluating all that has come before. As we look back, may we find empathy and sympathy for both our past decisions, and the past decisions of others as well. Let us dig deep inside of ourselves to release the pangs of regret and remorse held in our collective souls. The tears that come, let them serve as a balm, healing the parts of ourselves still broken. For, as Golda Meir once said, “those who do not know how to weep with their whole heart, don’t know how to laugh either.” May the gates of tears be open to all of us at all times.

A G’Mar Chatimah Tovah - A Writing and Sealing in the Book of a Life well lived.

To an easy and meaningful Yom Kippur!

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