

Yom Kippur Day 5785, Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein, Congregation Shir Shalom

“May Their Memories Be For a Revolution!”



The first funeral I ever attended was in February of 1996. It was for a woman that I knew in undergraduate named Sara Duker. We were in the same friend group and for a while I had a crush on her. A few years later, she had met a rabbinical student from the Jewish Theological Seminary and had fallen in love. They had been in Israel that year as part of his studies. A petite and intensely shy 23-year-old from Teaneck, New Jersey, Sara often wore a hat and was very religiously observant.

That November, Israel’s Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin had been assassinated leaving the peace process in shambles. But still there was optimism and newly opened borders with Jordan. Sara and Matt, trying to take advantage of that opportunity, had boarded the number 18 bus that Sunday morning to head off to catch a bus to Petra. It was eight am at the start of the Israeli work week. The bus was crowded and noisy. Few

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people noticed the strangely dressed young man who had stepped through the turnstile. When the bomb exploded it killed Sara and Matt along with twenty-three others, injuring scores more.

A few days later, over a thousand people packed into the large Conservative synagogue in Stamford, Connecticut where Matt's family lived. This was the first time I had ever witnessed the Jewish mourning rituals. After several psalms and speakers, Sara's mom spoke about how she pictured her daughter and her future son-in-law holding hands in their final moment. I, along with everyone else, was completely numb.

Seven years later, in the summer of 2002, I lost two more friends - Marla Bennet and Ben Bluestein - to a terrorist attack in Jerusalem. They were killed at the bombing of the Frank Sinatra Cafe on the campus of Hebrew University, while eating lunch in between classes. They were studying to become Jewish educators.

This one was even more personal to me. I had spent the entire year before studying with both Marla and Ben at Pardes, a liberal-Orthodox yeshiva near the German Colony. Marla sat by me in our daily Torah class. From San Diego, she was sweet and quiet, with short, cropped hair and a big smile. I remember that she always lined up a row of colored pencils to take notes. When asked about it, she said she liked things to be colorful.

Ben and I were actual friends. He was from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where my grandparents lived, and we had many people in common. He had even attended the shiva for my grandfather the year before. An aspiring DJ, he was loud and boisterous, and full of life. "I never spin on Shabbas," he told the head of the Yeshivah.

Ben and Marla were both in their early twenties.

When I learned the news, the pain was indescribable. I was at a large Jewish conference in New Hampshire. We held an impromptu service for

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them. I wrote poetry in their memory, wondering how this could have ever happened? Who could have perpetrated something so evil?

As the week of mourning went by, I remember a strong feeling emerging from within me: if this was a test between the bomber's vision of the world - full of cynicism and hatred, and my friends' vision of the world - full of love, life and hope, I didn't want the bombers vision to be the one that won out. I wanted my friends' vision to win out.

In my estimation, if I let my anger, my thirst for revenge, consume me, then the bomber would have won. If I stayed stuck in the moment of their death, the bomber would have won.

But, if I used the memories of my friends to fuel me to do acts of loving kindness, to live out the values that they had exhibited in their too short lives, to become a better person, then my friends would have won.

I didn't want the images of destroyed buildings and mangled bodies to be what I thought of when I pictured my friends. I wanted it to be their smiling faces in all the good times we shared together.

When October 7th happened, all of the feelings I had in that difficult time came flooding back to me. Only this time it was worse. Much worse. The news was inescapable. Every day there were more and more horror stories. This wasn't just a few dozen people, but thousands. And, not just killed, but held hostage as well.

As an act of self preservation, I didn't want to look at the carnage they were showing. I didn't want to be consumed by anger and revenge. I didn't want the terrorists' vision to win out.

So, for most of this past year, I have kept my distance from the news, from social media, and even conversations among friends. But, as stories from October 7th flooded in, the names and faces of the hostages kept popping

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up everywhere I went. At night before I went to bed, Ashirah would remind me of stories she had heard that day. One of her Israeli friends' brother - Tal Eilon - was killed protecting his family at Kibbutz Kfar Aza. She would tell me of the youngest hostage, baby Kfir, a seven-month who was kidnapped along with his 4-year-old brother Ariel. She told me about a pregnant woman, a newly married couple, and a Holocaust survivor who were all being held hostage. As hard as I tried, it was impossible to look away.

One name in particular came up more than the others, again and again and again - Hersh Goldberg-Polin. He was one of the 251 abducted. He and best friend Aner were at the Nova Music Festival celebrating his 23rd birthday a few days before. As terrorists swarmed the festival, they quickly scrambled into a nearby shelter to bunker themselves in.

Somewhere around this time, he texted his parents, "I love you."

News had already begun to spread throughout Israel, and he must have known they were scared to death. And, for good reason, as he texted, Hamas was slinging grenades into their bunker.

Each time, Aner and Hersh would sling them right back out at the terrorists. Seven times that happened. On the eighth, the grenade exploded killing Aner and blowing off Hersh's left arm to the elbow. He fastened a makeshift tourniquet to stop the bleeding. A video taken at the scene showed Hersh being carted off in a pickup truck.

A joyful young man, Hersh was a symbol of everything right about the world. For 329 days he languished underground, malnourished, tortured, only to be killed along with five others on the last day of August as IDF troops approached overhead. After eleven months in captivity, he was mere minutes away from being rescued.

As much as I wanted to look away, to not let his story seep into me, I couldn't. Because every day, around the world, his parents, Jon and

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Rachel, were sharing it. A quiet family, they put themselves out there, not just to free Hersh, but to free all of the hostages. They shared his story, over and over again. They shared it to journalists in Israel, at the March for Israel in Washington DC, with the Pope, and even at the Democratic National Convention. Each time ending with a message: "Hersh, if you can hear us, we love you. Stay strong, survive."

And, when they shared his story, they not only shared about their son's abduction, but about the entirety of his life. They shared about his early childhood growing up in the Bay area. How at 3-years-old, Hersh would grill them on the toughest of life questions as they walked to get coffee. How, as a kindergartener, he knew so many facts about US Presidents, he would charge adults for answers. How, when they decided to make Aliyah as a family when Hersh was only-seven, he wanted to retain his name, even if Israelis would have trouble pronouncing it.

They shared about a time in sixth grade when he learned about the many Africans seeking asylum, and Hersh insisted on going to rallies on their behalf. He even scoped out their home for spaces so he could hide them from the police. He determined that behind their dishwasher was the perfect spot.

They spoke about his love of traveling and going to music festivals. About how the summer before he was abducted, he had gone by himself to six different music festivals in six different countries.

More importantly, they spoke about what a good person Hersh was. Curious about the world, he would engage with anyone anywhere. As his father Jon said, Hersh was "always seeking to understand the other, and always with dignity and respect."

Each time his parents shared his story, Hersh would come a little more alive for me. His picture began to shine, even in my dreams. Jon and Rachel were more than random strangers in the world, they had become

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like family members. And, each time they spoke, it was not a message full of hate, but full of love.

At his funeral in early September - just about a month ago - they spoke not out of anger and spite, barely referencing October 7th at all. Instead they focused only on how much their son meant to them.

Here is what Rachel said at his funeral on September 2 on Har Hertzal

“I have had a lot of time during the past 332 days to think about my sweet boy, my Hersh. And one thing I keep thinking about is how out of all the mothers in the world, G-d chose to give Hersh to me. What must I have done in a past life to deserve such a beautiful gift? It must have been glorious.... For 23 years I was privileged to have this most stunning treasure, to be Hersh’s Mama. I’ll take it and say thank you. I just wish it had been for longer.”

And from Jon: “The 23 years of life that we had with you were a blessing. We will now work to make your legacy a similar blessing. You were a really great guy. I love you.”

Each of the roughly 1,200 people who lost their lives on October 7th, and the 251 more who were abducted - 101 of whom are still in captivity - has a face and a story. Each of them has people who love them and who will miss them for the rest of their days.

Each of them has left an imprint on this world, no matter how big or how small. Each of them deserves to have their stories shared. Not only about their deaths, but about their lives.

The traditional Torah portion for Yom Kippur day is from Acharei Mot, a portion that means “After the Death.” In it, we see Aaron, in what must have been tremendous and overwhelming grief, have to struggle to fulfill his role as High Priest. His eldest sons, his heirs, Nadab and Abiyhu, were

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taken from him in a tragic sacrificial accident. Trying to emulate their father, they took what was deemed a “foreign fire,” an “*eish zara*” up to the altar and were suddenly struck down.

While no specific time frame is given for our chosen reading for today, we imagine that it is occurring in the days and weeks after the accident. In his time of mourning, Aaron now must somehow put what happened to his sons behind him to fulfill his duty as High Priest.

This is the context of the ritual of the scapegoat, the central service of Yom Kippur day, where, in front of the entirety of the people, he takes two goats, one as a sacrifice and one to be sent out into the wilderness. In the portion itself, we are told nothing about what Aaron is actually going through. Nothing about the extreme pain he must have been in. What he must have been thinking or feeling at that moment? How each step must have been excruciating. How each action must have been a knife in his heart. We only see him walk step by step toward the altar, the same altar his sons were killed on, to fulfill his duty.

Every year I read this, I want to scream at Aaron to stop, to tend to his own needs, to be given the space to grieve any parent who loses a child fully deserves. But, in my heart of hearts, I understand Aaron would not have wanted this. Because he is not performing these rites and rituals to deaden the memory of his sons, but, rather, to keep them alive.

Our tradition teaches us that, above everything else, we should always “*Bachor Chayim*,” “Choose Life.”

Choosing life means being generous with our hearts, believing in the overall goodness of humanity, and not demonizing even our most fervent enemies. The terrorists win when we begin to see the world as black and white. When we cannot look with compassion at people suffering including, and most especially Palestinians. We may hate Hamas, but we cannot close off our hearts to the tremendous loss of life in Gaza. That is what

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Hersh would have wanted. This is what we owe all the victims of that awful day.

Several years after the bombing of bus 18, I went back to my alma mater, the Jewish Theological Seminary. It was on Simchat Torah, the most joyous of all holidays, the day we parade with our Torahs through the halls of our synagogue and the streets of our cities. I remember going into the basement of the seminary and seeing a room that had been dedicated in memory of my friends - the Mathew Eisner and Sara Duker Beit Midrash study hall. The tears of their loss still burned in my soul, but the suffering was eased by the enthusiasm of the holiday. We danced in circles, raising the Torahs high above our heads, exactly as Matt and Sara would have done in their all too short lives.

There is a saying that the survivor's of the Nova Music Festival have been sharing (Tomer and Shoval will offer it when they share their stories later today during Reflections): "We will dance again." By dance again, they mean live again. Full of life and love, just like they did prior to October 7th.

When I close my eyes to think of my friends, I do not picture the horror of how they died, I imagine the joy of how they lived - their faces beaming with pride at the way their memories have been shared from one person to the next. The name of the bombers have been lost to the sands of time. In this way my friends have won. We all have.

I conclude with the words, Hersh's father has begun to use each time he talks about his son. Not, "*Yehi Zichrono L'vracaha*," "May his memory be for a blessing." But, "*Yehi Zichrono L'Mahepecha*," "May his memory be for a revolution!"

By revolution, he means something different than the normal way we use the word. He means a shofar blast to wake the world up, to make it better. Not through violence and war, but through friendship and cooperation. Not through hatred and enmity, but love and friendship. This is how we will

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truly honor the memories of my friends. This is how we will ensure their memories are always for a blessing.

On this Day of Atonement, please join me in saying, "*Yehi Zichro Nam Mahapecha*" "May their memories be for a revolution."

May all of us be written and sealed in the Book of a Life Well Lived.
A Shana Tovah U'Metukah Yoter. A Good Year. A Sweet Year. A Better Year.