

Yizkor 5785: “We Remember Them”
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The Queen is dead, the Queen is dead!
Long live the King!
Long live the King!

With certain transitions, it can be vital to move quickly from one era to another. The speedy transition from one royal leader to the next is not as meaningful today, but does hearken back to a time when it was important for England to move quickly from one sovereign to the next. In our nation, we place similar importance on the transition from one President to the next. This transition is particularly acute when a president dies in office. On November 22nd, 1963, LBJ was sworn in as President aboard Air Force One only 90 minutes after President Kennedy had been declared dead.

We Jews do a similar thing. Of course not with respect to our Sovereign, as God is eternal, but with regard to our Sefer Torah – which we treat similarly to how we would treat our Sovereign, if God had a body. We clothe it in finery with decorative tapestry. Our Torah wears a crown of precious metal, and a decorative breastplate as well. We read through our entire *Sefer Torah* each year, and then on *Simchat Torah*, we end the reading of one year’s cycle and then immediately begin the reading of the next year’s cycle. Similar to the King or Queen of England or a US President, we are never between leaders.

In cases relating to the succession of heads of state and for very good reasons, we frontload the transition to what is next, and put off mourning what we have lost until after that transition is secure. After President Kennedy was assassinated we wanted there to be no question about who the legitimate leader of the free world was.

One of the wisest traditions we Jews have, however, in another realm, is centered around doing things in the *opposite direction*. After we bury a loved one, we return to their home or to our own home to sit *Shiva*. Our friends and family bring us food and consolation. Our community brings us a minyan so we can say Kaddish. We cocoon ourselves off from the world for these seven days. During *Shiva* we mourn, and there is no focus on the transition to what comes next.

As we gather here on this sacred and solemn Yom Kippur morning, we gather to mourn those we have lost. As with any year, we mourn those whom we have lost from our own family, and we also acknowledge and mourn the loss of martyrs of the Jewish people. As with any year, we mourn those whom we have lost in the past year, and we mourn those we have lost in years and decades gone by.

This year is also, in a significant way, very different from past years. This year, as we mourn our martyrs, we mourn those Jews, Arabs, Bedouin, Phillipino, Thai and others who were murdered in a *Kiddush HaShem* — murdered for simply being Jewish or a part of Israel. As we mourn these individuals, we have an obligation to remember them in the spirit of *El Maleh Rachamim*, where we refer to their holy and pure souls “*K’zohar HaRakia Mazhirim*” “...who shine like the splendor of the firmament...” Our obligation is to remember them in the best possible light.

I find having this reminder to remember them in the best possible light to be especially helpful at this moment, since our thoughts about these martyrs can too easily be impacted by what we learn of their political opinions and behaviors. I hope that one thing you have learned about me over our first year together is that I have a deep love for Israel. And you might also sense that I have some pretty strong opinions about Israel, even as I try to make space in our community for other perspectives. On October 7th, death did not discriminate, and as we remember those who were killed, we must love each of them equally with loving eyes.

One martyr we mourn this morning was a humble, powerful and inspiring grandmother, a member of Kibbutz Be’eri. Canadian by birth, Vivian Silver made aliyah in 1974. Vivian was a loving mother and grandmother whose backyard was littered with her grandchildren’s toys and who would spend entire days preparing for their visits.

Vivian — you will notice that I am avoiding referring to Vivian or any of the martyrs I speak about this morning using pronouns. It may feel awkward at times, but I want to use their names as much as possible — Vivian was a member of Women Wage Peace — a group she founded after the 2014 war in Gaza, and she had only returned on Friday, October 6th, from the group’s peace rally in Yerushalayim. Vivian had organized this rally bringing together thousands of Israeli and Palestinian women from Gaza and the West Bank to make the statement “Israeli and Palestinian women are determined to change the reality of the conflict!”

Vivian dedicated her life to building connections and understanding between Jews and Palestinians. Vivian participated in the organization On the Way to Recovery — a group of Israelis who transport Palestinians of Gaza to hospitals in Israel when they need lifesaving care. In fact because of her relationships, Vivian’s first warning of the attack and massacre came from a friend of hers in Gaza. Alone in her house on Kibbutz Be’eri, before she even realized that a massive attack and massacre were underway, Vivian received a phone call from one of her old friends in Gaza trying to warn her. “Vivian, what’s going on? What’s happening? We hear civilians and soldiers have been kidnapped and they’re already in Gaza. The pictures look horrible. Where is your army?” Vivian was murdered in her home on October 7.

Along with Vivian, we mourn so many. This morning I want to share with you the story of an Israeli from a very different background, who held very different political beliefs from Vivian.

Haim Ben Aryeh was an Israeli who led a very different life from Vivian. The son of immigrants from Iraq and Turkey, Haim drove an armored bus between the Jewish settlements of Gaza. Haim met his wife, Irit, when she begged for a spot on his already full bus headed back to Gaza from Tel-Aviv. They had been at a protest against the Oslo accords. Once married, a short time later, they made their home in Moshav Katif in Gaza.

Haim was known for his patience and kindness. Making his stops to pick up children on their way to school each morning, Haim was known to wait an extra minute if one of them had not shown up, thinking that perhaps they were just running a few minutes late. Haim knew each of them by name and family background. Haim's actions tell you that he saw himself as more than a simple *Nahag*, or driver. Many of us have experienced drivers like Haim in Israel—special people who look out for the well-being of their charges. People who make you feel that your safety and welfare are not just their job, but their mission.

Haim and Irit were also opposed to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan. And when they lost that vote and the time came to leave their home in Moshav Katif, they waited until the last minute, seemingly unable to believe that it was really happening. Dropped off at a girls school that night, they didn't know where they would make their new home.

It took fourteen years for the government of Israel to resettle 50 families from Moshav Katif in Gaza into a new Moshav called Karmi Katif. Those years of being unsettled exacted a deep emotional price on them all, and no one paid a higher price than Haim. But with the new home, things seemed to be returning to normal, Haim seemed to be finding his way again.

Then on October 7th, Haim's bus company called upon him to take his bus to Kibbutz Be'eri to transport survivors of the massacre to hotels at the Dead Sea. Knowing his sensitive nature and his special ability to handle delicate situations, especially with children, they thought Haim was the perfect person for the job.

Irit reports that Haim returned from this sacred mission around 4am. Hearing the key turn in the door, Irit went to check on him and found him crying in a way she had never seen before. "What happened?" She asked. "I couldn't help them" was his reply. "I am sure you did help them" she reassured him. He shared with her that "...[p]People boarded my bus half naked...they were wrapped in blankets? In towels?... The blood...People were covered in blood? Children covered in blood?...Children without socks or shoes? Fathers in their underwear? They ran for their lives? These people saw their families murdered, the most horrible images...and the silence...the entire two-hour drive to the Dead Sea was totally silent....My bus was full and no one said a word? Even the babies weren't crying? Not a single child said a single word and what could I do? I couldn't do anything? I couldn't help them?"

The experience of being unable to help these people was too much for Haim. He withdrew into himself. Unable to bear the pain, Haim died by suicide on October 25th. But we know it was really Hamas that pulled the trigger.

I selected the stories of Vivian and Haim to share with you this morning because they have to represent so many more. In doing so, I am mimicking a literary device of the *Tana"kh* called a "hendiadys," which uses two nouns separated by the word "and" to represent a complex idea. Think of *Eretz V'Shamayim* which literally means "Earth and Heavens," but when used together stands for the entire world. "Vivian and Haim" were two empathic Israelis who were mission-oriented, with deep love for Israel and the Jewish people, although it is hard to imagine two Israelis more diametrically opposed to one another in their politics.

During Yizkor, our task is to go beyond simply remembering the loved ones we have lost. Our tradition challenges us to examine their lives, to learn from their examples, and to find lessons we can apply in our own lives. In any year, Haim and Vivian's lives could teach us a number of valuable lessons. But this year, as we consider how their lives and how our people and *Medinat Yisrael* will move forward, we must look to a third story to remind us that whatever choices Israel makes, there are people who will pay the price of those decisions.

Matan Abargil, a 19 year old Golani soldier, was on duty the morning of October 7th. Like Omer Neutra, the tank commander from Plainview and now Hamas hostage in Gaza who graduated from Solomon Schechter of Long Island and whose picture we have on our *Bimah* here in the sanctuary and also in our Chapel, he was at the border as part of a first response team. Sitting around their *Namer* — APC or Armored Personnel Carrier, he and his fellow soldiers were joking around, drinking coffee at 6am when they saw the first rockets fired from Gaza heading into Israel. They got the call that an infiltration had been sited at Kibbutz Nir Am between Sderot and Gaza. Not knowing this was an invasion of thousands, not an infiltration of a few, they jumped into their *Namer* and headed out.

Quickly they realized that this was a different situation than what they expected, as they witnessed a whole sea of terrorists coming at them — on motorcycles, on foot, and in pickup trucks. They immediately began to fight, shooting as they continued on their way to the Kibbutz. Once they had arrived, they left the *Namer* and took back buildings that had been occupied by terrorists. Matan's commander described him as being in overdrive, kicking in doors, totally fearless.

Later, they were guarding the *Namer* as they waited for their commander to return from another mission. Exposed to the enemy and without their commander, they suddenly found themselves

surrounded by 30 or 40 terrorists. Quickly they ran back into the *Namer*. Outnumbered as anti-tank missiles and explosive devices were thrown at them, their vehicle was quickly immobilized.

Matan was the first to act — he opened one of the hatches and began to return fire. Other soldiers followed his example, and eventually Matan was shot in the hand. Someone took his place as he struggled to change the magazine of his gun with only one hand. Suddenly a soldier firing from another hatch was shot in the shoulder, falling back into the vehicle, leaving an open hatch. The terrorists took advantage of the open hatch and managed to throw a grenade into the *Namer*. Matan was the first to see it and tried to grab it to throw it back out. But with only one usable hand, he fumbled for a second or two. Realizing he was out of time to throw it out of the vehicle, Matan pressed it against his chest and turned away from his friends to face the wall of the *Namer*, so that when the grenade exploded, Matan bore its full brunt. In the arms of his friends as the medic tried to save him, some of Matan's last words were "I did everything I could for my country and my friends."

Before too long, a team of Border Police arrived to rescue the soldiers in the *Namer*, and because of Matan, **every other soldier in that Namer was saved.**

Hillel taught us *Ohev Shalom V'Rodef Shalom* — to love peace and pursue peace. We all share in Vivian's hopes for peace, even as we each have our own ideas about how to pursue that elusive goal. Sometimes the world of politics convinces us that one path forward leads to peace and the other to destruction. It is wise for us to remember that the road to peace between peoples often emerges from the most surprising of sources.

Israeli journalist Lee Yaron, the author of *10/7* and our guest speaker before our *Slichot* service shared with us that some in the peace camp are only more committed to the path of grassroots bridge building, while some have been convinced that it is no longer the way — at least at the moment.

As we have learned over the past year, many Israelis who dedicated themselves to building bridges with Palestinians in Gaza over politics and even war, lived in the *Otef*, area of Israel bordering Gaza, and were murdered on October 7th, regardless of their political beliefs.

We know that Hamas terrorists had maps of the Kibbutzim that labeled houses with the names of specific families, their units and ranks in the IDF and other associations. They didn't just attack Israel, they deliberately sought to murder specific individuals. Despite that heinous targeting, people of. Whatever our political opinions are, we must not allow Hamas to also murder the ideas that Vivian or Haim or Matan stood for.

I have recounted to you the stories of three heroes. Each dedicated their lives to Israel and the Jewish people in different ways. Theirs are extraordinary stories. And we must remember that they are also the stories of three unique and flawed human beings who loved and were loved. Our tradition teaches us that each person is unique and irreplaceable — that the loss of each represents the loss of an entire world.

These stories speak to us of so much more than their sacrifices for *Eretz Yisrael*. To their parents and siblings or children and grandchildren, they were beautiful worlds whose flaws made them perfect, just like the loved ones we are about to recall and honor through our Yizkor service. Please stand with me now as we first recite one Yizkor prayer for those murdered on October 7th and then continue with our traditional Yizkor service. As I read each sentence, please respond together with “We Remember Them.”