ערב יום כיפור תשפ"ה

EREV YOM KIPPUR 5785

OCTOBER 11, 2024

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Were we not so utterly preoccupied this past year by the events of 10/7, and all the horrific losses that terrible day, and the ensuing anguish and pain that Israel and all of us continue to endure, a death this summer might have attracted more attention and interest. Dr. Yitzhak Yifat, a resident of Ashkelon, died this past July at the age of 81. He achieved fame not in his latter years, but as a 23-year-old Israeli paratrooper, when his brigade entered Jerusalem's Old City on June 7, 1967, as part of its liberating forces. Yitzhak was one of the three soldiers captured in David Rubinger's iconic photograph, that appeared world-wide, a photo captured on our *Mizrah* window.

That photograph so resonated in 1967 because of photos that had emerged twenty-two years earlier, in 1945; photographs that depicted the remnants of our people liberated from the death camps. Those pictures were not pretty. The faces were gaunt, the bodies skeletal, appearing far closer to death than to life. Those images continue to shock us eight decades later as stunning evidence of the great evil wrought against our people, that the world can never be allowed to forget.

But twenty-two years later, in 1967, barely a generation in time, there were new images that emerged. The images of Yitzhak and his fellow paratroopers liberating the Western Wall and the Old City, images of Israeli soldiers in Sinai, in the Golan, in Jerusalem, achieving one of history's greatest military victories in six days' time, images reflecting vitality, energy, images bursting forth with life.

That the span of twenty-two years could represent so dramatic a transformation in a people, in our people, must be reckoned as one of the great miracles of world history. The image of a weakened, dying people transformed

into a living, dynamic, creative, militarily powerful, resilient nation – in twenty-two years – justified the optimism of Hirsh Glick, when he wrote amidst the despair of the Vilna Ghetto in 1943: "זאָג ניט קיינמאָל אז דו גייסט דעם לעצטן וועג – never say that your days are coming to an end." No, that is not the case at all, because "מיר זיינען דאָ," because we are here to stay.

How I wish that my sermon could end here, that the 1967 photograph would be the one that lingers. But all of us have seen the photographs of destruction from October 7th, and most recently, the photos of murdered hostages, kidnapped on that terrible day at the Nova Festival, who, on October 6th, bore resemblance to the healthy, vibrant soldiers of 1967, but who, following the horrors they endured, the starvation, the torture; brought back memories of those who emerged from the *Shoah* in 1945.

Following the enormous trauma that engulfed Israel a month ago when the bodies of the six beautiful murdered young Israelis were recovered by צה״ל, Mijal Bitton reflected on the tragedy in The New York Jewish Week. She writes:[1]

> I know that my tears are just among the many that our Jewish family around the world have been shedding since that day. So many of our brothers and sisters in Israel are in the eye of the storm — bleeding, losing loved ones, mourning personal pain, going into battle, enduring the worst cruelty imaginable in captivity. The rest of us — the collective Jewish people around the world — still feel their loss as if it were our own. This pain isn't distant; it's ours….
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> How could Hersh Goldberg-Polin's parents, who loved him so fiercely, who shook the foundations of heaven and earth to free him, not get to hold their sweet boy again? How could Ori Danino, who escaped the hell of Nova but went back to save others, not make it back himself? How could Alex Lobanov,

[1] Mijal Bitton, *Our Collective, Endless Grief*, The New York Jewish Week, 6 September 2024

whose wife gave birth to their second child while he was in captivity, documenting each new moment of life to share with him, be killed just miles away from his new baby? How could Almog Sarusi, who had already experienced the agony of seeing his girlfriend murdered at Nova, suffer even more? How could Carmel Gat, with her laughing brown eyes, who cared for the hostage children and taught them yoga to help pass the time, be taken from us? How could Eden Yerushalmi, who hid for four hours from monsters at Nova in a shrub and begged her family in her last words to save her, not be saved? These questions live in the deep pain we feel.

It was Sunday evening in Israel, on September 2nd, when the awful news of the discovery of the six murdered hostages came to light. Rabbi Daniel Gordis reflects on the deep challenge his family experienced, when, overcome with the deep grief that swept through the nation, they were about to attend a close family wedding that very same night. Daniel Gordis writes: [2]

The wedding had obviously been long-planned, people had flown in from everywhere to participate, and of course, there was a truly incredible couple to celebrate. But how? How does one begin a wedding, with the sun setting over the horizon of the Mediterranean, the gentle, life-filling breeze wafting through the crowd, knowing of the grief consuming everyone, everywhere?

You begin by singing what we've been singing, and praying, for eleven months: "אחינו כל בית ישראל – The entire House of Israel – הנתונים בצרה ובשביה – who remain in distress and captivity – המקום ירחם עליהם – may God have compassion on them – ויוציאם מצרה לרווחה – and bring them from distress to relief – ומאפילה לאורה – and from darkness to light – ומשיעבוד לגאולה – and from enslavement to redemption – השתא בעגלא ובזמן קריב – at this moment speedily, very soon."

That's how Danny Gordis' niece's wedding began. And somehow, they were able to muster the courage to celebrate, even on such a dark and terrible night. The very

[2] Daniel Gordis, *Israel from the Inside*, 3 September 2024

next day, along with many thousands of Israelis, Danny attended the funeral for the most prominent hostage, Hersh Goldberg-Polin. He notes that, like the wedding the previous night, the funeral began with the same prayerful song, אחינו כל בית ישראל. It was not apparent who had begun the song, not the officiating rabbi. Rather, it seemed to be a spontaneous outpouring of sadness encased in hope – that there would be a better day, that somehow Israel and the Jewish people would transition, מאפילה לאורה from darkness to light, a transition that we had experienced more than once in our long and challenging history.

You know, with Yom Kippur standing out as the major exception to this rule, it is forbidden to fast on Shabbat. There is one other, lesser-known exception, תענית חלום – the dream fast. According to Jewish law, upon awakening from a nightmare, one fasts for the day. And that fast was considered so important that most authorities mandated the fast even on Shabbat. Why the urgency? In the words of the Rambam:

> הָרוֹאֶה חֲלוֹם רַע צָרִיךְ לְהִתְעַנּוֹת לְמָחָר. כְּדֵי שֶׁיָּשׁוּב וְיֵעוֹר בְּמַעֲשָׂיו וִיחַפֵּשׂ בָּהֶן וְיַחֲזֹר בִּתְשׁוּבָה. וּמִתְעַנֶּה וַאֲפִלּוּ בְּשַׁבָּת.
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> A person who has a disturbing dream must fast on the following day, so that he will be motivated to improve his conduct, inspect his deeds, and turn [to God] in repentance. He should undertake such a fast even on the Sabbath….[3]

Why the fast? Traditionally, bad dreams were viewed as a message from on high, that we had done something wrong, that we had sinned. The dream-fast, like today's fast, was intended as כפרה, as atonement for sinful behavior, whether intentional or not.

So much of traditional Yom Kippur liturgy focuses upon apology, upon our seeking from God or from people we may have wronged, their מחילה, their forgiveness. But are there times when סליחה, when saying "I'm sorry," is unnecessary and unwarranted?

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[3] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Ta'aniyot* 1:12

To be sure, it was wholly appropriate when Israel's President Yitzhak Herzog, at the funeral service for Hersh Goldberg-Polin, said: "As a father and as the president of the State of Israel, I want to say how sorry I am… that we didn't protect Hersh [and his fellow hostages] on that dark day, how sorry I am that we failed to bring [them] home." [4] And at several of the funerals for the murdered hostages, signs displaying the word סליחה, sorry, were abundant.

But who could have expected that Hersh himself, hiding in a shelter after being severely wounded, just before being taken hostage by Hamas, managed to text a final message to his mother Rachel, saying simply: "I'm sorry." As Rachel would recall, in her eulogy at the funeral: "You lost your arm, and you thought you were dying. You wrote to us 'I'm sorry' because you knew how crushing it would be for us to lose you, so you fought to stay alive… all this time."

> She also offered her own apology to Hersh, despite spending nearly every day since his kidnapping [with her husband Jon] traveling and lobbying for his and the other hostages' release. "At this time, I ask your forgiveness. If ever I was impatient or insensitive to you during your life, or neglectful in some way, I deeply and sincerely request your forgiveness," she said. "If there was something we could have done to save you and we didn't think of it, I beg your forgiveness. We tried so very hard. So deeply and desperately. I'm sorry." [5]

And consider the example of thirty-six year old civil engineer and elite combat unit commander Yitzhar Hoffman, one of the first soldiers to reach Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7th, when the kibbutz was still under heavy Hamas assault, personally rescuing large numbers of kibbutz members who were hiding in their safe rooms, which on that tragic day had proven to be anything but safe. After saving several lives in Be'eri, he joined Israel's forces in Gaza, fighting

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[4] Andrew Silow-Carroll, *New York Jewish Week*, 13 September 2024
[5] Ibid.

heroically there, and when severely injured, continuing to lead an essential operation, refusing medical assistance until their goals were achieved.

During a brief respite from battle, Yitzhar traveled to the Dead Sea to meet with some fifteen Be'eri survivors whom he had rescued. His message to them, as recounted by his wife Zohar: "הוא ביקש סליחה מאנשי בארי, he asked forgiveness from the residents of Be'eri, שהם לא הצילו את כל מי שהם רצו להציל, because they had not saved all those they wanted to save." [6]

He who had done so much, apologized, feeling he had not done enough. Some three months into the war, Yitzhar fell victim to a Hamas sniper.

Of course, we all want to say to Yitzhar, זצ״ל, and to Rachel, no need to apologize. What you have given to Israel, to the Jewish people, offers more strength, more encouragement, more fortitude, than can ever be measured. That you apologize for not having done more, even when more would have extended well beyond the possible, attests to your courage, your character, under unimaginable circumstances.

On this day when we stand before God seeking forgiveness, what has befallen us this past year, suggests that we consider modifying the classical formula, and that in addition to our על חטא's, our asking God to forgive us, that we demand that He seek our forgiveness as well.

Israeli poet Assaf Gur, in one of the most powerful Hebrew poems composed since 10/7, writes the following:

יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא
ואף אחד לא בא
כמה אלפים קראו לו בשבת בבקר
זעקו את שמו
התחננו בדמעות שרק יבוא

[6] Zohar Hoffman, in יום אחד באוקטובר, Maggid 2024, p. 286

אבל הוא שבת מכל מלאכתו
שום אלהים לא הגיע
ושום אלהים לא הרגיע

Yitgadal v'Yitkadash sh'mei raba
And no one came
Many thousands called to Him on Shabbat morning
Crying His name out loud
Tearfully begging him just to come
But He had ceased from all His work
No God arrived
And no God provided comfort. [7]

Something truly interesting occurred this past year in Israel and in many diaspora communities – the recitation of *Avinu Malkeynu* on Shabbat. It has been the prevailing Ashkenazi custom not to recite *Avinu Malkeynu* on Shabbat, even tonight or tomorrow, on Yom Kippur. Many Sephardic communities recite *Avinu Malkeynu* on Shabbat, while others don't, while all Ashkenazi communities, following the sixteenth-century ruling of the Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isserlies, prohibited the recitation on Shabbat.

So it was especially noteworthy when Rabbi Herschel Schachter, *Rosh Yeshivah* at the Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical School of Yeshiva University, ruled, following October 7th, that Ashkenazi Jews should recite *Avinu Malkeynu* on Shabbat, every Shabbat. A prominent Israeli Ashkenazi rabbi, Avraham Stav, ruled likewise for Israel. I remember how moving it was, during my visits to Israel in February and July, when in Ashkenazi Orthodox *minyanim*, *Avinu Malkeynu* was recited, line by line, on Shabbat.

[7] Assaf Gur, *Kaddish*, in *Shiva, Poems of October 7*, Rachel Korazim et al, ed., p. 20-21

The reason for the original prohibition reflected our unwillingness to ask God for things on Shabbat, in a sense, granting God His day of rest, not wanting to bother him. But Rabbi Schachter, Rabbi Stav, and so many others, found that reasoning, this terrible year, to be incredibly week. Like the Israeli poet, we want to trouble God a lot this year. We demand His comfort, His support, His presence.

At the funeral for Hersh Goldberg-Polin last month, even though it falls nowhere in the usual funeral liturgy, spontaneously, the many thousands in attendance, began to sing *Avinu Malkeynu*.

Please make sure to remain in shul until the end of tonight's service, when for the first time in Beth David's history, we will recite *Avinu Malkeynu* on Shabbat, as we identify as fully as we can with the grieving families in Israel, the families of those still in captivity, and the entire nation of Israel in its hour of pain.

It was exactly 120 years ago when Hayyim Nahman Bialik wrote his epic poem בְּעִיר ההריגה, *In the City of Slaughter*, in response to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, which traumatized the Jewish world when forty-nine Jews were brutally slaughtered and some five hundred injured (numbers that seem rather small when compared to October 7th).

In his poem, Bialik vented a pent-up frustration at the seemingly eternal powerlessness of the Jew, who, since the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, had been stateless, and dependent on the all-too-often elusive kindness and protection of others. With his searing, merciless words, Bialik may have ignited the spark, that some four decades later, led many Jews, oppressed beyond description, to transform their prayer into a proclamation to the world that an end had come to the Jewish status quo of submission, that there would be hell to pay were we to be harmed. With his words, Bialik may have ignited the spark that burst into beautiful redemptive flame with הקמת המדינה, with the formal end to Jewish homelessness in 1948, and that needs to be kept burning brightly today.

Too many of us feel the need to apologize for Israel, when not everything that Israel does reads well in social media, in our newspapers or on broadcast media. But part of heeding Bialik's 120-year-old message, part of integrating the angst we feel these very days, demands that we limit our willingness to apologize. Yes, we will offer אל חטא recitations for the wrongs we commit against each other, for our personal human failings. Yes, we will recognize, that in Israel we will not claim perfection, but to apologize for Israel's right to self-defend, to exist, to remain in the active map of the world – חס ושלום – never.

We who have survived so much, on this holiest of nights, need recommit ourselves, heart, body and soul, to remain ever strong and passionate in our faith, ever unflinching and unapologetic in our support of מדינת ישראל, the State of Israel, so that, in the words of the Psalmist, we can each proclaim: לא אמות ואחיה – we shall not die but live, and proclaim, through our people's continuity, through the resilience of our Jewish tradition, through the strength and vitality of *Medinat Yisrael*, that מיר זיינען נאך דא, that we are still here, and are here to stay.