

“The Yom Kippur War 40 Years Later: Time for another national atonement”
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At a shiva minyan last week, someone who had been a member of Har Shalom for several decades pulled me aside to tell me a story. Gripping my arm he said, you know rabbi, 40 years ago I was at Har Shalom on Yom Kippur. On the afternoon of that particular Yom Kippur I went home to rest before coming back to shul for the concluding services. That’s when I heard the news. Nobody else at the synagogue knew what was happening, but as soon as I found out, I rushed back to tell everyone. I immediately knew what news he was referring to before he even finished the story.

Not long ago I was talking to one of my dearest friends who recently became the senior rabbi of a large Conservative synagogue in Kansas City. He told me the story of how his predecessor at the time, Rabbi Dr. Morris Margolies, a tremendous force in the local and national Jewish community, completely threw out his Yom Kippur sermon that same day and instead began auctioning off Israel War Bonds right there in the synagogue on Yom Kippur day! “Israel is under siege,” he said to his congregants, “and this is *pikuach nefesh*...this is about saving the lives of our brothers and sisters and our Jewish state! Now who’s going to buy a war bond for \$35,000? Who’s going to buy one for \$50,000?”

Yom Kippur is undoubtedly the quietest day of the year in Israel. Traffic is non-existent. Every store, every restaurant is closed. Israelis even stop smoking for the day! On heavily trafficked thoroughfares where lumbering Egged buses usually travel, children ride bicycles and cruise along on skateboards and scooters. Parents push baby strollers as they walk right down the middle of the street. Whether in religious or secular neighborhoods, a hush falls over an otherwise very noisy Jewish country for 25 hours every year.

Forty years ago, that stillness of Yom Kippur was shattered by the drumbeat of war. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, the celebrated former general proclaimed to Prime Minister Golda Meir that day, “the Third Jewish Commonwealth may be destroyed!” The first fell to the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the second to the Romans in 70 CE, and this modern, sovereign Jewish state, established only 25 years earlier was at risk of falling to the Egyptian and Syrian armies, he warned the elderly prime minister. At the start of the holiday there were some 450 Israeli

infantrymen, 300 tanks, and only 50 artillery pieces facing 100,000 Egyptian soldiers, 1,350 tanks, and 2,000 artillery pieces across the Suez. On the Golan only two Israeli infantry regiments peered across the frontier at 45,000 Syrian troops and 1,137 tanks. Two-thirds of Israel's soldiers were home with their families for Yom Kippur...far away from their guns, their planes, and their tanks. Golda Meir, who once acknowledged that she didn't even know how many soldiers made up a brigade, was forced to decide between a general staff that was internally at odds over whether Egypt and Syria were building up troops and amassing artillery as a lead up to invasion or as standard military maneuvers. Just five months earlier threatening troop buildups on the Egyptian border cost a cash-strapped Israel \$35 million just to call up the reserves...and it was a false alarm!

The truth is that many of the Israeli military's top brass thought another Arab invasion was impossible. After the stunning victory of the Six Day War just a few years earlier, the widespread sentiment was that Israel had dealt a deadly, humiliating blow, particularly to the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Syrians. How could they possibly raise arms again against a clearly superior IDF...an army and air force that, in just 132 hours, one of the shortest wars in recorded history,¹ destroyed billions of dollars of Arab weapons, hundreds upon hundreds of tanks, and downed nearly 500 aircraft. Israel emerged from the Six Day War with a casualty rate of 25 to 1 in its favor. The IDF sat within sight of Damascus, Amman, and Cairo, and Israel had conquered 42,000 square miles of territory...3.5 times its original size. Jerusalem was once again united. Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban proclaimed: "Never before has Israel stood more honored and revered by the nations of the world."² Israel's stunning victory, wrote Michael Oren, "allowed American Jews to walk with their backs straight and flex their political muscle like never before."³ Israel's dynamic preemptive attack was immediately studied at military academies the world over. Aliyah surged. Israel felt confident, strong, and perhaps for the first time, a respected member of the family of nations. Who could have predicted that the Arabs would invade again? Certainly not the head strong, over confident generals who were advising Golda Meir.

¹ Oren, Michael. Six Days of War, p. 305

² Ibid. p. 309

³ Ibid

Of course we know that the Arabs certainly did invade on that quiet Yom Kippur day...and with ferocity—from the air, the sea, and on the ground. 10,000 shells rained down on Israeli positions in the war's first minute.⁴ A stream of Syrian tanks kept coming across the Golan even as Israeli battalions ran out of ammunition. While the Israelis managed to turn the tide on the war, once again routing the enemies and sitting within artillery range of Arab capitals, this time the losses were catastrophic. A 33 year old recently discharged soldier from the Sinai began a vigil across from Golda Meir's office and held a sign reading: "Grandma, your defense minister is a failure and 3,000 of your grandchildren are dead." Per capita this amounted to 3 times America's losses in Vietnam.⁵ It's no wonder that Golda Meir seems much more popular in the American imagination than the Israeli. In Israel you can go to Rabin Square or Har Herzl; to Ben Gurion University or the Weizmann Institute. You can travel on Begin Road, through the heart of Tel Aviv. Golda Meir has a square—in New York City; A statue—on W. 39th Street in Manhattan. A public school named for her—in Milwaukee. But Israelis are noticeably understated about Mrs. Meir. She bore the brunt of the Yom Kippur War agony—and made many of the mistakes that made war more likely and more bloody.

If post '67 Israelis projected power and strength and even arrogance, post '73 Israelis were significantly humbled and sober. The Israeli journalist and author Yossi Klein Ha'Levi described in a speech I heard him give recently in Washington that the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War required atonement on a national scale. Everybody from right to left was chastened by that war. All their assumptions and positions now had to be rethought and revised. The future of Israel would lie not in all the old ideological bromides, but in fresh new thinking and reconciliation. If that was the case 40 years ago, how much more is it true today? And not just for Israelis, mind you, but for Americans as well, and for all those who love Israel and are committed to its destiny. I know that some of you are on a few of the email lists that I am cc'd on, and that you appear in some of the same Facebook groups, and that you argue with friends and family members just like I do over Israel's survival and safety. Talking about Israel today surfaces all kinds of emotion and zeal. The elusiveness of peace, as well as some of the internal complexities of the Jewish State only entrenches people more deeply in their positions. This High Holiday season, on the 40th Anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, I think it's time for all us

⁴ Golda, p. 321

⁵ Ibid. p. 338

who care about Israel to do some more atoning. All ends of the spectrum have committed their share of sins, and it's time to own up to them and learn from them.

On the right side of the spectrum, the sin, the *al heit*, the transgression is the minimizing of the costs of Israeli occupation of the West Bank, and the costs of the settlement enterprise. There are 2.5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank alongside 80-100,000 Jews, and while many Israelis and American Jews may not think settlement expansion is such a big deal, most Palestinians see it as clear evidence that Israel is more interested in acquiring land than making peace. Many of those settlers believe in a vision of a "greater Israel" that encompasses all of Judea and Samaria, the Biblical names for the West Bank. Many live in far flung settlements where young Israeli soldiers are deployed to defend them. I'm not talking about the settlement "blocs" near Jerusalem and Tel Aviv where some 400,000 Jews currently live...I'm talking about remote settlements far beyond the security barrier, deliberately placed near major Palestinian cities to foreclose the possibility of territorial compromise. Even Likud Prime Minister Netanyahu says he backs a two-state solution, which would require the relocation of Jews living in many of those areas. But the messianic fervor on the right and the settler movement's push to establish what it calls facts on the ground often runs contrary to the pragmatic decisions that are required for peace making. And this was not the Zionist dream of the founders of the Jewish state. None other than David Ben Gurion himself told the British Royal Commission in 1937 that "our aim is to make the Jewish people the master of its own destiny not subject to the will and mercy of others, as any other free people. But it is not part of our aim to dominate anybody else...there are other inhabitants of Palestine who are here, and as we do not want to be at the mercy of others, they have a right not to be at the mercy of the Jews."⁶ It is a wound on the psyche of the entire nation, and I would even suggest on the conscience of the Jewish people, to control the daily lives of so many Palestinians. There is no doubt that the Palestinians have some reckless leaders who have made major political blunders, but extricating Jews from the thick of Palestinian populated territories and earnestly pursuing a two state solution will be the only salve that will begin to heal that wound.

On the left end of the spectrum, comfortably liberal Jews must atone for an acute tendency to minimize the daily threats that Israel has to live with...the relentless hostility not only of many

⁶ "On the Arab Question," David Ben Gurion, January 7, 1937. The Jew in the Modern World, p. 603.

Palestinians, but from the entire region. Right now Israelis are being fitted with gas masks should there be an American sponsored attack on Syria. Many Israelis fear that *they* suffer Assad's retaliation if a strike occurs. Israel again contending with the specter of regional war. Can you imagine raising your children in such an environment? Sari and I worry about our kids crossing Glen Road safely when they walk to shul. Israelis worry about whether their kids can get to an air raid shelter on time; If there will be enough gas masks for the whole family; If their teenage kids who become adults overnight when they don the Israeli Army uniform will be stationed in a battle zone or on a hostile border. And some American Jews sit here, 6,000 miles away and judge Israel for being too cautious about its security? About sometimes having to apprehend or target those who plan attacks and acts of vicious murder? There is no single issue that Israelis care more about than their own safety and security and that of their families. Yet, Israel is the only country in the world whose very existence is challenged in supposedly respectable places every single day. Israel is asked, over and over again, to make tangible compromises—like precious, historically significant land—for vague, intangible promises of peace...Or to release dangerous criminals, terrorists with blood dripping from their hands, as a prerequisite for negotiations. It is moral turpitude that there are those on the left who hold Israel entirely responsible for all the suffering and entirely excuses the Palestinians as the victims. They Palestinians have had a string of feckless leaders, and for far too long pursued violence and terrorism, instead of peace and development. Leaders who lacked the courage and convictions to make the very of sacrifices and concessions they expected of Israel. And the same political and ideological left that trumpets women's rights, gay rights, freedom of speech, religion, assembly, press and democracy too often lambasts Israel, which is principally organized around all of those ideals, while giving a free pass to the Palestinians whose central authorities seem much less committed to them. At 65 years old, the State of Israel, believe it or not, is one of the world's oldest democracies. It has never known one nanosecond of non-democratic rule. That seems like something the left ought to celebrate not censure.

But left and right are not the only trajectories that demand t'shuvah...that need to confront their shortcomings and recognize the bigger picture. Israel is also in need of profound healing between religious and secular communities. Just as the architects of the state of Israel never envisioned the current dynamic with the Palestinians, they would be appalled by the theocratic drivel that is peddled by the religious establishment. A Haredi community that benefits from all

of the protections of a Jewish state but refuses to raise its flag, serve in its army, or pray for its welfare; A Chief Rabbinate that yields to the most extreme voices and seems increasingly comfortable writing off huge swaths of the Jewish people, including fellow Orthodox rabbis who don't meet their fanatical standards. And there is no question that the entanglement between religious parties and the State of Israel has served to widened the chasm between secular and religious Jews to the point where they don't interact, they don't attend the same schools, they don't understand each other, and they view each other with deep contempt. Nowadays many Israelis leave Israel to get married or to celebrate other life cycle events so they don't have to jump through the meshuggenah hoops of the Chief Rabbinate. You heard the story of the secular Israeli family that decided to celebrate their son's bar mitzvah in a highly unusual way. They flew all the guests to Thailand, for a picturesque, jungle tour on elephant back. When the party reached a particularly secluded spot in the jungle, the whole caravan came to a halt. The father asked the Thai guide for the reason for the delay. "I'm sorry sir," replied the guide, "but there are several other bar mitzvah parties in front of us, and this makes progress very slow."⁷ All the way back in 1896 Theodor Herzl warned "we do not mean to found a theocracy, but a tolerant, modern civil state." When Jews feel compelled to leave the Jewish state for Jewish life cycle events, or they skip them all together—because any ritual or custom is automatically rendered treif because it smacks of religion, you know there's a problem. This past year in particular we have watched the courageous work of Women of the Wall attempting pry open access to the Kotel for non-Orthodox Jews, to women, to people who feel profoundly connected to these sacred sites, but who are unable to express themselves fully because of the stranglehold the rabbinate has on these places of deep significance to the entire Jewish people. Israel must figure out a way to preserve its essential Jewishness without *k'fiya datit*—without coercion and without disenfranchising whole segments of the Jewish people.

The ugliness of the Chief Rabbinate and the policies of the Ministry of Religious Affairs have had a blinding effect on the secular population. Secular Jews, and many Conservative and Reform Jews have some repenting to do as well. There is too little respect for the astonishing rebuilding of the religious world that has taken place in Israel after the flames of the Holocaust nearly consumed it. Ben Gurion never believed that the yeshiva world would repopulate after

⁷ Etzioni Halevy, Eva. The Divided People, p. 93

the Shoah, that's why he permitted them so many exemptions and disproportionate representation early on. Some 90% of the rabbis and scholars who were alive before the Holocaust were dead after it was all over. Countless yeshivot, synagogues, Jewish schools and institutions were utterly decimated. And yet, the remnant that was replanted in Israel, has experienced an unbelievable renaissance 65 years later. There is incredible Torah learning all over Israel today; tremendous centers of Jewish study and the rebuilding of Jewish life and scholarship that no one envisioned. Is there anyone who doesn't believe that's good for the Jewish people? I don't care what form of Judaism you practice, or what particular ideology you subscribe to! Hillel taught in the Mishna: *marbeh Torah marbeh hayyim*...More Torah means more life.⁸ And if Israel is to be a Jewish state then there must be Torah...it needs to be a Jewish society, not just a society made up of Jews. As Yossi Klein Halevi so poignantly writes: "a healthy people should appreciate its rival camps, each of which is attuned to different elements of the Jewish experience."⁹

And the sin of all sides, left and right, secular and religious is that no one wants to listen to each other! They talk past each other, over each other, but rarely do they stop to listen and learn from each other. No camp has the whole truth or the perfect recipe for peace, or the precise plan for Israel to be both a Jewish and a democratic state...But in order to solve these problems we need each other. We need the totality of Am Yisrael to take part in the conversation about Israel's future. And we need people to stay engaged not to be turned off or turned away. This is as critical and existentially significant as any external threat.

Every once in a while some cheeky kid asks me, *Hey Rabbi, prove to me that there are miracles. I haven't seen any miracles lately, how do I know that they are real?* My answer is always the same. The survival of the Jewish people for 3,500 years despite every conceivable circumstance and foe is unequivocal proof to me that miracles are real. And the renaissance of the Jewish people in our ancestral homeland after 2,000 years of exile is yet another proof. Israel is an extraordinary, dynamic country. Its growth and sophistication are mindboggling. It is beautiful, plentiful, and powerful. And I can't emphasize enough how privileged, how blessed all of us should feel to be living at this particular epoch of Jewish history. Countless generations of our

⁸ Avot 2:8

⁹ "Needed: An Israeli Dialogue of Mutual Gratitude," by Yossi Klein Halevi, July 4, 2013. Shalom Hartman Institute

ancestors could only dream about what we are able to hop on a plane at Dulles and experience for ourselves...for free even if we are under 24 and haven't participated in a peer-oriented trip before! I love Israel with all my heart and it is a source of tremendous pride for me as a Jew. And I believe that the future of the Jewish people is directly linked to the outcome of this experiment called the modern State of Israel. The stakes are that high. That's why it's time for American Jews as well as Israelis to listen to each other more closely...to learn from each other's positions, and to think outside of our preconceived ideological boxes.

You know in a Jewish wedding we recite the Sheva Berakhot, the seven nuptial blessings. The sixth of those blessings begins: *Samei'ach tesamach rei'im ha'ahuvim*. Grant perfect joy to these loving companions. The word for companions, *rei'im* is spelled *resh ayin yud mem...Reish ayin* is also the word that means negative, displeasing, unpleasant...it's as if we are proclaiming beneath the huppah that this couple will love each other even while acknowledging and accepting each other's flaws and imperfections and limitations. That is the love affair I have with the Jewish people. I may not always agree, I may get angry, frustrated, and occasionally discouraged, but my love is never in question. And that should be the nature of our love for Israel as well.

I began by referring to a war and I want to end by referring to another one. A battle to be precise. This year is the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. About an hour north east of here President Lincoln came to that place that claimed more lives than any other battle in the Civil War and wondered aloud about *this* country "whether any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." We could say the same about Israel--a uniquely conceived and dedicated nation if there ever was one. In large part, the success of the experiment called the State of Israel is up to us, the totality of the Jewish people. Let us dedicate ourselves in this new year to *ahdut Yisrael*, to the unity of the people of Israel and to our collective solidarity with the State of Israel...so that 150 years from now there will be no question whatsoever about Israel's existence, its permanent place on the map of the world and the in the soul of the Jewish people. As the prophet Malachi¹⁰ says, *ve'hakiroti lakhem berakha ad belidai*, and I will pour out unending blessings upon you.

¹⁰ Malachi 3:10

So may it be God's will. Amen.