

On the 50th Anniversary of the Yom Kippur War

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Fifty years ago, in March of 1973, a 10 year old girl moved with her family from a suburb in New Jersey to live in Israel for the year. The year started off with all of the typical adjustments a family might have after relocating, but thank G-d, as the chagim arrived that fall, the family had started to acclimate.

They lived in Jerusalem, in the French Hill neighborhood. And that Yom Kippur, 50 years ago, started like any other Yom Kippur, with the familiar intensity and rush leading into Kol Nidre. The next day, of course, was different from any other Yom Kippur in the history of the Jewish people, as this was Yom Kippur 1973, the Yom Kippur War.

The 10 year old girl and her family heard sirens, and had to go to a bomb shelter, where they sat for many hours. The next two and a half weeks were unlike any the state of Israel had ever seen - with 2,656 soldiers killed (second most only to the War of Independence).

You'd assume this would be terrifying to anyone, especially a 10 year old girl, though as she described it in her journal, she was "pretty calm about the whole thing," and was upset that she had to go to school during what would have been Sukkot vacation. You might say that this 10 year old girl was young and innocent and didn't totally understand what was happening around her - and there might be an element of truth to that, as I happen to know that as this girl grew up and went on with her life, there was a level of PTSD accompanied with deep reflection that set in over time, especially as her own son entered the IDF and serves today as a paratrooper.

Of course, if you haven't figured it out yet, the 10 year old girl is my mother. Her time living in Israel with her family 50 years ago during the Yom Kippur War was one of those experiences that only some of us have in life - especially at that age - a singular experience that stayed with her for the rest of her life. It shaped who she is as a person, as a Jew, and as a Zionist. It led her back to Israel, to study at Hebrew U, and to a life devoted to supporting Israel, and eventually to being an Israeli citizen today.

And, while I of course had no direct first hand experience of the Yom Kippur war, I can confidently say that had my mother not been with her family in Jerusalem in 1973, experiencing the Yom Kippur War with the rest of Israeli society, I would not be who I am today. I would not be the same person, the same Jew, or the same supporter of Israel.

We can and should spend time this Yom Kippur considering our history and the heroism of 1973. But I want to reflect on this Yom Kippur, the 50th anniversary of the war, about something different... about how and why it came to be that an experience that my mother had 50 years ago, one that I never experienced, made its way into shaping my own identity in such a powerful way. Because there is a message and a lesson to be learned about how to transmit our stories and our values to the next generation - one that I think is especially relevant today on Yom Kippur.

It might sound counterintuitive to reflect today on how we transmit values to the next generation, because in many senses, today is all about *us* - our current lives. In fact, this theme of focusing on ourselves today is actually fundamental to the name of the day, Yom Hakipurim.

If you trace this word to its earliest use in the Torah, which in some ways serves as a prototype for what כפרה is all about, you see the word's first use is all the way in the beginning of the Torah, in the story of Noach. Hashem tells Noach:

עֲשֵׂה לְךָ תֵּבַת עֲצֵי גֹפֶר קִנִּים תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתָהּ חֹמֹת זָפֶתָהּ וְכָפַרְתָּ אֹתָהּ מִבִּיַּת וּמִחוּץ בַּקָּפָר:

Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments, and cover it inside and out with pitch.

What does כפרה, or Yom Kippur, have to do with Noah's ark? Rashi notes, מִכֵּנִי חֹזֵק הַמַּיִם זָפֶתָהּ מִבִּיַּת וּמִחוּץ, that since the waters were so rough, it was necessary to cover the entire Ark both inside and outside with pitch. Essentially, the כפר, the pitch, is used as a layer on the ark that is meant to protect it from getting water inside. This was something that Noach needed to do to ensure that he and his family survived - in a way, this כפר, was all about keeping him and his family alive.

And conceptually, we are doing exactly the same thing on Yom Kippur - today is a day when we are covering up, so to speak, *our* sins. And this process is meant to protect *us*. It's not only seen in the pitch, the כפר, of Noah's ark - but also so much of our davening this Yom Kippur is centered around the lives that *we* live. We express remorse over *our* mistakes when we say the viduy and al chet. We cry out Shema Koleinu, asking Hashem to hear *us* now, חוּס ורחם עלינו. We say כי אנו עמך - *we* are your nation. The focus today is on who *we* are, what *we've* done, how *we* are going to live better lives - it's all about *us* - and very little seems to be about our future, the next generation. It's a day when it's really ok to be purely selfish, in a good way - to really focus on ourselves.

But in reality, this is not the only way of looking at Yom Kippur, because it's not the only way to look at the כפר, the pitch. Because the כפר of Noah's ark was not only about protecting Noah, but it was also about protecting his descendents. After all, the Ark that Noah created was itself all about the next generation - ensuring their very survival.

In interpreting the word כפר, the Malbim, Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, a 19th century Ukrainian rabbi, offers a beautiful insight and deepens our understanding of the word. He says that the כופר, the pitch, can be interpreted symbolically as well as literally. He says, והוא משל אל, "The [pitch] is an allegory for the Divine Providence that protects certain individuals, from the sons of Noah until Avraham and his children." Just like the pitch protected the Ark from water, it also protected the future generations, their connection with Hashem - their religious lives. It protected Noah's children, Shem, Ever, eventually Avraham, and the future generations after Avraham.

In other words, the כופר that the Malbim is describing isn't just about focusing on Noah's own survival, and not even his family's survival, but rather, the כפר that Noah used symbolizes the transmission of values from one generation to the next. The pitch protected not only the ark, but also protected Noah's values, and ensured their survival.

This doesn't only transform our understanding of Noah's כפר, but also can transform our understanding of Yom Kippur. The message for us is that Yom Kippur is not only about our own self improvement, it's also about who comes after us!

And this brings me back to my mother, and her experience in the Yom Kippur war. Because this is precisely the approach that my mom took in framing her experience of the Yom Kippur war for me and my brothers. My mom could have taken her experience, and kept it to herself, not sharing much about that time in her life. The mere fact, on its own, that she was in Israel during the Yom Kippur war in itself did not impact my identity. In some ways, I imagine, that would have been the easier choice! To hold this experience for herself, but hold off on sharing it with others.

But instead, she used the story to intentionally shape our identity, to transmit values, to teach us, to inspire us. We learned from her about what it was like to be part of the collective of Israeli society during this desperate time in history. We learned about how Israel was, and still is, what we need to fight for and prioritize as Jewish people. But most importantly, we learned by example - my mom transformed this traumatic experience into one that inspired her to be a Zionist, and this in turn inspired us. This happened each Yom Kippur, and throughout the rest of the year.

With this in mind, we can all ask ourselves: What are the things I've learned, or things I am currently learning in my life, that I want to highlight for future generations? What are the experiences I've had, or I'm currently having, which have important lessons?

And just like it certainly took a lot of work for Noah to cover his ark with pitch, this process is challenging for us as well. This is hard work. Because you may be younger, and don't feel much has happened yet in your life that you can focus on passing down. Or you might be older and you have too many experiences to choose from! You might hear this question and not yet have an answer. Or you're somewhere in between all of these options! All of this is ok! Today is a day for us to reflect and contemplate not only ourselves, but who will come after us and what we will share with them. You may or may not yet have answers to these questions, but either way, it's a conversation that should be integral to today.

And particularly now, as we go into Yizkor, it's a moment for us to consider not only the experiences and lessons that we will pass down to the next generation, but also the events that we are blessed to have been passed down to us. Some of us have memories of loved ones that we formed with them - maybe we sat with them each Yom Kippur, sang particular tunes, or had other meaningful moments in the davening that are part of that person's legacy. Some of us carry memories in this moment about our loved ones - experiences from their lives that they told us about their own lives - stories that we never experienced but we feel like we did - that still teach us lessons today. Some of us have loved ones that we never really got to know as well as we'd like - but their memory is brought to life in this moment through small snippets of stories that we hold very dear in these moments. Yizkor of Yom Kippur in particular is a time for us to appreciate the gifts our loved ones gave us through transmitting their life's story, their legacy, their values to us

There is a famous Gemara in Masechet Shabbat 133b, which says that two of the 13 middot, those that we say on Yom Kippur, are really a challenge for us to emulate Hashem - קָהָה הָיָה חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם — אֲף אֵתָהּ הָיָה חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם. But today, I'd like to extend this to a different one of the 13 attributes - נִצְרַחַס - G-d preserves kindness for the coming generations. Because today, we remind ourselves that Hashem will always focus on passing on kindness to the next generation - and we should focus on doing the same, in our own lives. קָהָה הָיָה חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם — אֲף אֵתָהּ הָיָה חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם

We each have an opportunity to focus today on ourselves, but also, to emulate Hashem and do the G-dly work of focusing on those who will come next. Today, this Yom Kippur, on the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur war, I am thinking about the values that have been passed on to me through my mother's experience in the war. And I'm thinking about the next generation - our children and our grandchildren, and what I will teach them from my own life. I want to bless all of us with a Yom Kippur of introspection about our own lives, but also a Yom Kippur of reflection about what we can teach those who come after us. Gmar Chatima Tovah.