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Faith, Responsibility, and Suffering: Rav Amital's Response to the Yom Kippur War

נחפשה דרכינו ונחקרה ונשובה עד ה׳
(איכה ג, מ)

Since the 1973 war, Yom Kippur has come to signify more than forgiveness and mercy; it has become a day marked by confusion, hurt, pain, and death—"the day of God, great and terrible" (Malakhi 3:23). The war arrived like a hail of meteors. Half a century on, its smoke still hovers over us, the craters remain open just beneath our feet.

The military, political, and diplomatic events of the Yom Kippur War reshaped Israel forever. No less crucial are the still haunting efforts to come to terms with the physical, mental, spiritual suffering brought about by the failures the war set loose.

Eight students of Yeshivat Har Etzion—Asher Yaron, Amaziah Ilani, Avner Yonah, Binyamin Gal, Daniel Orlick, Moshe Tal, Raphael Neuman, and Sariel Birnbaum *z"l*—were killed in the war. Many others were wounded. As is well known, Rosh Yeshiva Rav Yehuda Amital threw himself into caring for his students, the living and the dead, and their families. As R. Aharon Lichtenstein would later put it: "He conveyed the sense of a man who, on the one hand, possessed the leadership ability to seize hold of the hard and tragic situation, as it were. On the other hand, the gentleness and sensitivity that bespeak and reflect the depth of identification with grief."[1]

1 Aharon Lichtenstein, "*Mish'an u-Mivtah le-Shakulim*," in *Le-Ovdekha be-Emet: Li-Demuto u-le-Zikhro shel Ha-Rav Yehuda Amital*, edited by Reuven Ziegler and Reuven Gafni (Yeshivat Har Etzion & Maggid, 2011), 333. Other, powerful reminiscences of R. Amital's experiences in the war and its aftermath, and the ongoing relationships he forged both with bereaved families and with the IDF's officer corps, appear in the essays by Orit Avneri and Yedaya Ha-Cohen in the same volume.

English readers wishing to learn more about R. Amital can turn to the biography by Elyashiv Reichner, *By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital* (Koren, 2011). Those wishing to read more in English about his distinctive religious thought and educational philosophy now have at their disposal Yehuda Amital, *Jewish Values in a Changing World* (Ktav, 2005); Yehuda Amital, *Commitment and Complexity* (Ktav, 2008), and Yehuda Amital, *When God is Near: On the High Holidays* (Maggid, 2015).

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To be at once a man of action and a man of sorrow takes a special kind of courage, and R. Amital's courage took many forms. Making theological, moral, and Jewish sense of the horror of the war, was one of them. Here, as elsewhere, his primary stance was, as the line of liturgy he so loved prods and encourages us, *le-ovdekha be-emet*, "to serve You with truth"—to stand inside the truths of trauma, shock and pain, the truths of hope, and of moral obligation, and never to look for short-cuts.

The elegantly translated and annotated essay, "Towards the Meaning of the Yom Kippur War," presented in this special issue of *Tradition*, originated as a talk delivered by R. Amital in Har Etzion on 25 Heshvan 5734 (November 20, 1973), some three weeks into the ceasefires that ended the shooting war. In it, he works both to understand the war as a historical event, and as a call to *teshuva*, and frames each as something both old and new.

Re-reading the essay today, it seems situated along several trajectories: responses to the war in Israeli society and thought; the history of *Hilkhot Teshuva*; and the history of Religious Zionism, which is incomplete without R. Amital's own remarkable path as educator and thinker.

For Israeli society, the Yom Kippur War was an earthquake. In the political realm it inaugurated the torturous decline of the State's founding Labor Party elites and sparked the founding of Gush Emunim. The social and cultural spheres were similarly impacted.[2] Artists, writers, and thinkers began to dig more deeply not only into themselves and their experiences, but into Jewish texts and traditions in a new search for meaning. As powerfully put in Rachel Shapira's postwar poem *Hashkem Hashkem ba-Boker* ("Early, Early in the Morning"): "We promised ourselves to learn from the beginning / what meaning there is to good or evil, defiled or pure."[3] All the more jarring for its coming so soon after the stunning Bible-like victories of 1967, the 1973 war was a summoning to deep introspection on the arrogance and pride that had come before so savage a fall.

While it may not seem surprising that in facing the war R. Amital turns in time-honored fashion to the theological and normative framework of *teshuva*, the way he does so is regularly arresting.

2 So much has been written on the war that one scarcely knows where or how to begin. One book deserving of wider recognition, not least for its expertly synthesizing the political, cultural, social and religious effects of the war, is Gershom Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967–1977* (Times Books, 2006).

3 Available at https://benyehuda.org/read/14508. Set to music by Sasha Argov it was indelibly performed by Chava Alberstein on her monumental 1975 album, *Kemo Tzemach Bar* ("Like a Wildflower"), itself a response to the war in many ways (https://youtu.be/_iOx1J-2DE8).

Teshuva as Active Contemplation

Given R. Amital's call for *heshbon ha-nefesh*, spiritual accounting, it is not surprising that Maimonides' teachings on repentance are central to his presentation, though his formulations are striking. He opens by considering *hitbonenut*, introspection, as both a natural tendency and a moral demand, even, or perhaps precisely, in the face of our ultimate ignorance and uncertainty. In his framing, the first demand of *teshuva* is to stop and think. The reader cannot help sensing that this formulation is not just an interpretation of Maimonides' but of R. Amital's own experience.

Throughout Jewish history, *heshbon ha-nefesh* was the obligatory pursuit of an individual; if it related to the communal sphere at all, then it was a disempowered community in exile. But R. Amital was ever attuned to the times in which he was living. What then would national *heshbon ha-nefesh* mean for the empowered State of Israel? And at the same time how, amid the steady reckoning with the new meaning of Jewish collectivity, are we to preserve the lone, singular individual in his or her responsibility and sorrow, standing before God? Rather than casting blame on others for their sins, he urges, first, looking inward, and says that it is incumbent precisely on Religious Zionism to lay aside the familiarly comforting thought that *teshuva* is for other people.

The requisite *teshuva* is for the failing of *kohi ve-otzem yadi*, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deuteronomy 8:17). Yet he does not deliver this message punitively. We can acknowledge our strength—but only so long as we acknowledge its divine source. While calling on his Religious Zionist community to introspect and change, he is here, as elsewhere, offering a subtle counterpoint to other camps: to the Haredi stance that Jews ought not to have state-level power at all, an untenable position after the Shoah, and to the secular Zionist leadership, whose wielding of that sovereignty was laced with hubris, resulting in horror and death.

The Meaning of Jewish Statehood

Indeed, central to his thinking is the meaning of Jewish statehood—not exactly the Messianic state for which we have been waiting and will continue to anticipate, but instead a polity to be understood in the seemingly humbler and challenging terms of *Kiddush Hashem*. Again and again throughout his life, R. Amital stressed the centrality of *Kiddush Hashem in extremis* as well as in daily life, and for the individual as well as the collective.

The Shoah was, for him, the ultimate *Hillul Hashem*; the Jewish State founded so soon after is potentially the source of *Kiddush Hashem* if we make it so.[4]

This was also deeply tied to his reading of Rav Kook's vast corpus, which offers readers so many points of entry and interpretation. R. Amital focused on R. Kook's ethical teachings, including his conception that the very idea of *Knesset Yisrael* is of a divinely-ordained collective meant to light humanity's moral way, such that the project of Jewish revival in *Eretz Yisrael* is above all meant to be spiritual and moral. At the same time, R. Amital's acute sensitivity to human suffering and sorrow was manifest in his steady, dogged commitment to complex and pragmatic negotiation with reality, in place of clean-cut dogma and ideology.[5] The witnessing of *Kiddush Hashem* is itself tied deeply to his interpretation of the Yom Kippur War.

The war, he says, was *milhemet mitzva* to save Israel, and, as all Israel's *milhamot mitzva*, served to proclaim God's unity to the world. The Jewish State is obliged to be a *Kiddush Hashem*, as Rav Kook said it should be, and not God's revenge on the nations of the world.[6] Only hatred of Judaism and desire for Jerusalem, he says, could so unite Arab states otherwise and always at each other's throats.

The suffering brought about by the war should not to be seen as of a piece with diasporic suffering. To the contrary, the war broke out precisely in response to Israel's sovereignty. The fact that it became a global event attests to its eschatological character, as does the miraculous

4 Rav Amital's views on the Holocaust are spread through his writings, and treated at length in Moshe Maya, *A World Built, Destroyed, and Rebuilt*; *Rabbi Yehudah Amital's Confrontation with the Holocaust* (Ktav/Urim, 2005). This writer has at times struggled to understand the respective places of *Hillul* and *Kiddush Hashem* in R. Amital's thinking on the Shoah, as to why so vast a martyrdom would not seem a vast sanctification. Perhaps he reached this conclusion because Jews were given no choice at all and were killed no matter who they were or what they did? The global complicity and disregard for Jewish suffering? The sheer extent of the Devil's reign in those years? Or perhaps, here too, he was, with characteristic honesty, trying to honor equally compelling understandings of a historical event that utterly defies understanding.

5 See R. Amital's essay, "On the Significance of Rav Kook's Teaching for Our Generation," in *The World of Rav Kook's Thought*, edited by Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg (Avi Chai, 1991), 423–435. For a general survey of this and other themes in R. Amital's thought, see Reuven Ziegler and Yehudah Mirsky, "Torah and Humanity in a Time of Rebirth: Rabbi Yehuda Amital as Educator and Thinker," in *Torah and Western Thought: Intellectual Portraits of Orthodoxy and Modernity*, edited by Meir Y. Soloveichik, Stuart W. Halpern, and Shlomo Zuckier (Maggid Books, 2016), 179–217.

6 This is, needless to say, in starkest contrast to the teachings of Meir Kahane, which have gained increasing traction in our day. See Adam Afterman and Gedaliah Afterman, "Meir Kahane and the Contemporary Jewish Theology of Revenge," *Soundings* 98:2 (2015), 192–217. In conversation with this writer R. Amital expressed his consternation that any *beit midrash* would "let this Kahane through the door."

nature of Israel's ultimate victory after the utter collapse of the war's first days. But, if so, what sort of eschatological vision is this? Characteristically, he suggests, this is not a summons to self-congratulation but a dark, necessary task of "redemption by way of suffering," *ge'ula be-yisurin*. This brings us full-circle to Maimonides and the idea of collective *heshbon ha-nefesh*. Because one can imagine something different, better than the present, there is an immediate obligation of "crying out" per the presentation in Maimonides' *Hilkhot Ta'aniyot* which connects *tze'aka* directly to *teshuva*.

Public prayer and fasting is rooted in an acknowledgement of human vulnerability, grounded in an awareness of the moral stakes of human action in God's world, rousing the community to acts of compassion that aim to open sluices for God's compassion in the world.[7] In R. Amital's view, what is the nature of this redemption by way of suffering? It is one that teaches "the purpose of suffering is not only punishment. Suffering is also cathartic and it educates. Suffering has educational goals that could be completely distant from the sins which caused the trouble. An educational goal elevates a person through the path of suffering by a process of inserting [into a person] an awareness and sensitivity in a particular realm or direction, a process which could be lengthy or short. Clearly, it all depends on us, and us alone."

This is not an easy absorption of suffering into immediate Messianic expectation. Again and again he cites Maimonides on the perils of calculating the end-time in anticipation of the arrival of Messiah, which fosters neither piety nor love of God. We must believe in redemption, even as we move without respite through the great unknowing that is human history, with all its paradoxes, above all with the knowledge of *be-damayikh hayyi:* the blood is real, and the life is real as well.

The concrete situation facing R. Amital in this discourse as an educator and pastor is bringing strength and solace. And all the while not to cut corners or let himself off easily (his well-known motto, "*ain patentim!*") to bring comfort and to lay hold of individual and communal responsibility. As he points out in his discussion herein of Nahmanides, there is a dialectic of weeping for an individual and for the many, and in the end one cannot forego either one. Indeed, part of the *tikkun* the war can bring about is the lone individual's value and worth—and knowledge that there is a profound difference between Israel and the nations.[8]

R. Amital is not the only figure to approach this issue; of course, the dialectic of individual and community is central to the thought of

7 These formulations arise from my reading of Jonathan Wyn Schofer's beautiful chapter, "Drought," in his *Confronting Vulnerability: The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 109–139.

8 One is reminded of R. Amital's comment that it was during his time in a Nazi labor camp that he recited "*she-lo asani goy*" with greater *kavvana* than he ever did before or since.

R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and needless to say, R. Kook as well.[9] Yet the absence of reference in this discourse of R. Amital's to R. Kook's *Orot ha-Teshuva* is striking. The great Kabbalistic theosophy of that work is too sweeping, too inviting to take one's gaze off the dead and their loved ones and absorb them in the great cosmic motions of the Messiah. Also, *Orot ha-Teshuva* is concerned with the cosmic sweep of repentance, and individuals' working through our regrets for failings, frustrations, and alienation, with little discussion of historical suffering. Moreover, what that work addresses somewhat less straightforwardly is what R. Amital is centrally concerned with here: repentance from sins in the interpersonal realm.

Rav Amital's Own Trajectory

Throughout his life R. Amital evaded easy categorization, not least with regards to the fraught and deeply consequential issue of the State of Israel's place in the Messianic drama. It is worth remembering that while Zionism and Messianism were twinned from the beginning, the full-blown ideology that the State constituted *at'halta di-ge'ula* emerged later, taking on greater force after 1967. This was in no small part due to the popularity in those years of *Kol ha-Tor*, the work from which R. Amital quotes in his discussion of redemption by way of suffering.[10] In historical perspective, it was the Yom Kippur War's brushing up against

9 Of course, the very eclecticism in the sources of R. Amital's teachings—R. Kook, Hungarian figures like R. Moshe Shmuel Glazner and Hatam Sofer, various Hasidic streams, alongside, one suspects, *Musar* teachings of the Slabodka school from which his father-in-law and grandfather-in-law emerged—reflects the non-dogmatic tenor of his thinking.

10 *Kol ha-Tor* presents itself as a collection of messianic teachings of the Gaon of Vilna, as transmitted to his disciple and distant relative, R. Hillel Rivlin of Shklov (1757–1838), who was part of the early nineteenth-century Lithuanian migration to *Eretz Yisrael*, known as *Aliyat Talmidei ha-Gra.* The work was first partially published by members of the Rivlin family in 1947 and in its entirety, from manuscript, in 1968 by the magisterial, fascinating scholar, R. Menachem Kasher, who included an essay of his own, entitled "*Ha-Tekufa ha-Gedola*." It has been the subject of intense scholarly debate ever since. The overwhelming consensus is that the work was at the very least not written by R. Hillel or in his lifetime, but later (and perhaps much later). At stake in this seemingly recondite debate are two important questions: What sort of full-fledged messianic doctrine did the Gaon of Vilna subscribe to and impart to his students, if indeed he had one at all? What exactly were the motivations and principles of *Aliyat Talmidei ha-Gra* and their descendants, especially the Rivlin and Salomon families, who were crucial to laying institutional foundations of the New Yishuv well before the advent of Zionism, and how are they to be understood in the sweep of Zionist history as a whole? A major article on the subject by the remarkable Yosef Avivi, "*Kol ha-Tor: Dor Ahar Dor*," *Mekhilta* 1 (December 2019), 159–336, also constitutes an anthology of a massive number of sources in general on the *aliya* of the Vilna Gaon's students from the early nineteenth century to the present. Readers seeking to learn more about this should seek out the works of Emanuel Etkes, Raphael Schuchat, and Arie Morgenstern.

near-apocalypse, so soon after the stupendous victories of 1967, that gave rise to Gush Emunim. In other words, the war led to the widespread operationalization of messianic thinking as a concrete political activist program. As Religious Zionism took on an increasingly messianic character, R. Amital's thinking on messianism, situated as always in his concrete work as an educator refusing easy answers, shifted, in multiple ways.

An independent-minded thinker who defied easy categorization, R. Amital's very public moves towards the leftward side of Israel's political spectrum over the years were not an about-face, but a revisiting and deepening of his abiding commitments and values. As Kalman Neuman put it, if in the early years R. Amital polemicized with those outside Religious Zionism who saw nothing redemptive here, as the years went by he polemicized within the Religious Zionist camp, for its constricting the meaning of Jewish statehood to *Eretz Yisrael*. He didn't lay out a messianic doctrine but conveyed his sense of events; he was motivated not by Messianism but concern for Jews' bodies and souls.

A number of things drove him to his later positions. One was his horror at war and the hope that if the cost of avoiding war was a ceding of some of *Eretz Yisrael* it was a cost very worth considering. Another was the mounting gap between vision and reality, and his sense that the aspiration of redemption itself was giving rise to irresponsible behavior, a narrowing of emphasis to territory without regard to ethics or *kevod ha-beriyot*.[11] Here as always *Kiddush Hashem* was central—hence his vehement response to the 1982 massacres at Sabra and Shatila, his recoil from the militarism of Ariel Sharon, alongside his demurral from messianic Religious Zionism's adopting a bulldozer mindset of its own, and from the dogged naïveté which Peace Now, for its part, displayed in its way.

His mix of pragmatism and *yirat shamayim* caused him to look lucidly at the programs of his day, and ask if they really reflected our best efforts at religious truth. As he said, "we are *Ge'ulei Hashem*, not *Ge'ulei Mashiah* or *Ge'ulei Eliyahu*." He emphasized the extent to which R. Kook's ideas about the beginning of redemption centered on ethics and spirituality. More broadly, as he put it, true Messianism talks not only about faith but about Jewish suffering; not only about earthly politics, "Whole Land of Israel" (*Eretz Yisrael ha-Shelema*) and population transfer, but about spiritual *tekuma* and *teshuva*.[12] In certain respects, Rav Amital's messianic reading here in the immediate aftermath of the Yom Kippur War seems situated between those two periods outlined by Neuman.

11 See Neuman's afterword to *Be-Shuvekha le-Zion* (Yediot Sefarim, 2022), 409–410.

12 See for instance, *Be-Shuvekha le-Zion*, 103, from a talk delivered in 1992.

As in his first phase, in 1973 R. Amital was working to convey the sheer significance of the times in a redemptive frame to Haredi and secular interlocutors who reject that frame, each for their own reasons. As in his latter phase, he struggled to honor the sheer difficulty and complexity of events. But in the essay presented here, he is working to convey the redemptive frame to his immediate, so to speak familial, audience, communicating to them and to himself that their suffering is meaningful. And he is employing the straightforward language of redemption from which he came to later demur, but which he never entirely abandoned.

For both periods of his thought the Holocaust was crucial—its suffering is what made the creation of the State a stunning redemption. And its suffering is what made R. Amital say over and over that neither he nor anyone could ever truly claim to read God's mind. His concern first and foremost for suffering—and the potential to avoid further war—was no small part of his turning away from what had become the mainstream of Religious Zionist doctrine, under the aegis of R. Zvi Yehuda Kook and his disciples.

To him, not to seek the meaning of events is to abandon God's connection to the world, and our own God-given minds. At the same time, to presume we can know how all will turn out and on that basis to pursue courses of action leading to suffering is its own form of hubris and rebellion against God. In this we see an analogue to the words of a significant secular writer, public figure, and Holocaust survivor, Abba Kovner, with whom R. Amital maintained a friendship. Speaking at a memorial service for the Yom Kippur War in 1980, Kovner said "history is made not by *hakhamim* but by *ma'aminim* (not by the wise but by the faithful)." There is, he said, "but a footstep's worth of difference between faith and fanaticism, but it is on that one step that the Jewish people built all that they have built in the Land of Israel. The problem today," he said, "is that we are too much *hakhamim* to be *ma'aminim*."[13]

Throughout his life, R. Amital took up the twin challenges of wisdom and faith. He succeeded in neither relinquishing the probing of the mind nor the longing of the heart, to look honestly at oneself and the world from as broad a perspective as one can without ever losing sight of concrete human suffering. He continued as he had that day in 1973 in yeshiva comforting his students while recalling those who lost their lives in that war of Yom Kippur.

13 Abba Kovner, *Al ha-Gesher ha-Tzar: Massot be-al Peh* (Sifriyat Poalim, 1981), esp. 215–216.

A Concluding Reflection

Here, as elsewhere, one must resist the temptation to cast R. Amital as more systematic a thinker than he was. As Akiva Ernst Simon once said, there are two kind of theologians, those who think God has a system, and those who think He has truth.[14] I would add that to think that God has a system that we humans can grasp is itself idolatrous folly; but that does not release us from the burdens and joys of thinking. In that deeper sense of *Talmud Torah ke-neged kulam* – our study and reflection on the holy things that have no measure is itself without measure, and cannot be any other way. The truths that we can discern as they emerge, as Buber understood, are those of encounters with God, others, and ourselves. And the truths to which R. Amital is driven in these pages emerge from his own searing encounters with the truths of his time, of his students' lives, and their deaths.

14 Akiva Ernst Simon, *Ye'adim, Tzematim, Netivim* (Sifriyat Poalim, 1985), 164–165. This comment appears in Simon's 1963 essay on Martin Buber; I think that it may apply as well to R. Kook, and certainly to R. Amital.