

Lessons Learned From Michael Levin, z"l - Rabbi Alan Silverstein

Rosh Hashanah 2006

Throughout the past couple of months - the Land Israel has been at the center of our Torah and Haftorah readings - & the State of Israel has constantly been in the news -

The war in Lebanon and Israel's North, reminded us that the Jewish State is perpetually engaged in a struggle for existence and for the safety of its citizens.

Over the past several months - I have been privileged to be in Israel 3 times -

1. The first time -- was a wedding for our Israeli cousins in suburban Tel Aviv --- on a Sunday evening in early April

Since I was officiating at the Bar Mitzvah on Shabbat - Rita and myself could not fly abroad until Sat late at night -

"WHEN IS THE CEREMONY?" - I asked our cousins

"Whenever you arrive!" came the response - I laughed. They didn't.

Family means so much in our Israeli relatives. They delayed the huppah until we arrived from Ben Gurion Airport - ready to celebrate --

2. The second trip was as a delegate representing Conservative Judaism in the World Zionist Congress - It was a memorable affirmation of global Jewish life. Elected representatives came from dozens of communities throughout the world

On route at Newark Airport late on a Sat night - following a June Bar Mitzvah

I encountered an El Al Security Man --- "what is the purpose of your visit?" he asked

"I am a rabbi - going to the World Zionist Congress"

"A rabbi?" He commented skeptically - seeing the absence of a beard or other tell-tale signs

"Oh yeah! So, which Torah reading was read in synagogue this morning?" he queried smugly

Parshat Behaalotcha_____

"And which one is read next week?"

Parshat Shelach Lecha_____

Duly impressed, stroking his chin, the security officer winked at me - "Rabbi, you didn't think **I** knew that, did you!"

My 3rd trip to Israel was on August 2 in the early days of the war in Lebanon.

It was a sudden, painful journey with our dearest friends Mark and Harriet Levin, along with their loving daughters Elisa and Dara. We were traveling on route to the burial of their beloved son and brother - Michael, z"l

Michael Levin, a 22-year-old paratrooper, was killed in action as an officer in Israel's special forces, serving courageously in Southern Lebanon

In preparing this sermon, I agonized: How could I articulate the impact of this sacred journey upon me - so very different from my dozens of previous trips!

I chanced upon a column written by journalist Andrea Simantov - She wrote: "[Two decades ago I made Aliya] After a month in Ulpan and receiving an Israeli driver's license, I laughingly said at a community Shabbat luncheon that I finally "felt Israeli." In response, a middle-aged native-born Israeli woman sitting across from me, rebutted - not unkindly - "You aren't Israeli until you attend your first soldier's funeral."

Such a painful yet accurate insight! - The visceral sharing of the precarious balance between life and death in a Jewish State reborn at such a moment defies description!

It opens the door to the roller-coaster of powerful emotions of that 3rd trip - August 2 through August 7

This morning - at our New Year - with Israel present within our Torah and Haftorah readings, and in the headlines - I will share some of the life lessons that I learned from our precious Michael Levin

1. First -- I learned more powerfully than ever before - in the words of my dear friend Harriet Levin - Michael's mother - "Mee KeAmcha Yisrael - **What an Amazing Country Israel is**" - The response of Israelis to the Levins was unambiguous and overwhelming: "The entire State of Israel is with you in your grief. Michael is our family member, too."

WHAT DO I Mean? Here are but a few examples:

1. Under heavy fire and at peril to their own lives - members of Michael's Unit 890 carried his fallen body several miles in the dead of night to safety - They recited the Shema over him as an act of Hesed - He was not a comrade in arms to them! He was their brother whom they were determined to bring home to Israel.
2. The army also made certain that reporters could not broadcast the identity of an American "Lone Soldier" ["chayal boded"] who had fallen, prior to the Levin family being notified in person
3. To sensitively achieve this objective, in Philadelphia -- the Consul General came personally to tell the tragic news to Harriet and Mark, Elisa and Dara and to Michael's 2

grandmothers - As a true mentsh, he arrived along with a paramedic and a social worker - even an ambulance, in the event it was needed -

4. Since Michael's definitive wish had been to be buried in the Jewish State, the government of Israel also made all the arrangements - They booked the El Al flight for the Levin family. They made hotel accommodations [Moreover, a month later they flew Michael's parents back to Jerusalem for the Unveiling - They will continue to bring Harriet and Mark Levin each year for an annual visit to the grave site -
5. An army contingent met us inside Ben Gurion Airport. They did not leave the Levin's side for moment - They took me aside and confided, "Rabbi, please encourage Michael's family not to have a moment's hesitation in asking for any special consideration. Nothing is too large or too small. We are here to give as much comfort as is humanly possible."
6. All of us feared a dry, unemotional military ceremony with barely a minyan present. The funeral took place in Jerusalem at Har Herzl on Tisha B'Av - a place and time of great honor in Israeli society.
7. When we arrived, we saw thousands of people were milling around. The parking lot was jammed. Taxis were arriving. The bus stop was full. We figured there must be dozens of events taking place that Tisha B'Av. We did not realize that they were all there for Michael --- The army had sent loud speakers traveling all over the city announcing that it would be - "an act of Hesed - to pay respect to the death of a hero - a holy person - it would be Hesed Shel Emet."
8. 2,000 to 3,000 people were present, crying with us, offering emotional support. It was a sea of am Yisrael: religious and secular, old and young, olim and sabras, Americans and Ethiopians. It an outpouring by people who had loved Michael and by many more who had never met him but were moved by his story.
9. As an Israeli journalist in attendance wrote to her readers : "We wanted the Levins to know that we love Michael. We cherish his memory. We are grateful for his sacrifice and will never forget his spirit, and in turn, his love for us. We cannot give him back to his loved ones. But we can [so-to-speak] "pay it forward" and not allow his sacrifice to be for naught-
10. After the service, people remained for 2 and ½ hours - Some even came back to the grave the next day. Hundreds upon hundreds were present on Labor Day Monday for the Unveiling - [As Adina Podell's Israeli sister Aliza reflected in an email:--- "[At the unveiling] we introduced ourselves to the Levins. They were gratified that there are people here in Israel, who even though we didn't know Michael, will to continue to be visiting his grave"
11. In the words of Harriet Levin - "Me KeAmcha Yisrael - What an amazing country!"

2. I learned from Michael - Concretize passions into concrete deeds
1. Rita and I used to "poo=poo" Michael's constant talk of Aliya, of serving in the Israel's army, which we heard throughout his early teenage years - "He's just a kid," we assumed.
2. Untrue! - On the contrary, Michael was a young man in terms of chronological age, but he proved to be an old soul. He had clarity in his dreams far in advance of his peers
3. Michael's neshama embodied the courage of his 2 grandfathers, of blessed memory - Martin Levin, a WWII war hero for whom Michael was named; and Irv Solarsky, an iron-willed Holocaust survivor of Auschwitz and other concentration camps
4. Michael put his passion for God and for Israel into action - as a lesson to us all.
5. **Religiously**, he wore a yamulka and tzitzit at public school in Bucks County, PA - Most of his non-Jewish friends had never before met a religious Jew!
6. Michael observed Shabbat each week in a suburban residential development, even without Jewish peer-group support
7. Michael ultimately wore a Kippah with his Paratrooper Unit's insignia at all times inside Israel. He did so with great pride, putting into action his devotion to God!
8. **In terms of Michael's activating his love of Israel, he** arrived as a new immigrant at 118 pounds, with mild asthma, sore knees, very little conversational Hebrew - Yet Michael had the heart of a lion - Through sheer determination, he transformed his dreams into reality
9. **When he would see dignitaries like Shmon Peres - Michael would go right up to them, shake hands, introduce himself and say with no hesitation - "My name is Michael Levin. Please remember that name. I will make my mark in Israeli society"**
10. **Hearing of this boldness, Michael's Dad asked --- "Michael, how can say such a thing? Dad - "Trust me on this one"**
11. Michael was determined to be a member of an elite army unit. He arrived at the special induction center. He was told that interviews were granted only by those presenting coveted printed invitations -
12. Undaunted, Michael surveyed the building, climbed a dumpster, opened a 2nd floor window and broke in. He arrived unannounced at the interview room, to the surprise of a duly impressed IDF officer - "If you are so very determined to be given a try-out, who am I to say NO?".
13. With countless hours of practice, Michael became a remarkable sharp-shooter
14. He built up incredible physical stamina. He displayed courage beyond description - He even volunteered to be a decoy in West Bank urban terrorist strongholds.

15. Wearing a protective vest, Michael would draw out gun fire of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah snipers - so that his unit could go after them
16. Buried not far from the grave of his hero - Yoni Netanyahu - Michael's grave reads "Here lies and American oleh whose love for God and Israel is eternal"
Turning dreams into Actions - that too was Michael's legacy
3. Michael taught me to love Israel even more than my passionate love of the past - Michael's words in our many conversations ring powerfully in my ears. If you want to read similar sentiments, I refer you to Rabbi Daniel Gordis' moving diary entitled, *Coming Together, Coming Apart*
1. This past week, Michael's loving father Mark reflected to me - "Alan, in the past 4 years we have come full circle"
2. "Mark, what do you mean?"
3. As a new immigrant 4 years ago, Michael used 2 words to open many doors in the Jewish State - "Uncle Alan" - "Do you know Rabbi Alan Silverstein? He is my Uncle."
4. Now - we are all so privileged when we see people's eyes light up at the mention of our connection with 2 precious words - "Michael Levin"
5. Michael loved his life in America - His decision to make Aliya was not a rejection of the USA - But for Michael, "[Israel is a place] where even the simplest things are often seen for the miracles they are"
6. The Hebrew language - reborn as a spoken tongue after thousands of years - is a miracle -
7. Street names are miracles - They are not merely Main Street or Broadway - but Hillel Street, Rashi Street, King Solomon Boulevard - the names of Judaism's greatest heroes
8. Walking in the footsteps of our biblical ancestors and our Sages of early rabbinic times is a miracle
9. Experiencing a tapestry of Jewries from dozens of lands and traditions is a miracle
10. Singing HaTikva [which gives us goose bumps down our spines], waving the Israeli flag which was draped on Michael's coffin, these too are miracles
11. "Uncle Alan, Who wouldn't want to live in a place where even the neighborhoods are miracles? "It is a place of dreams, and from dreams you don't just walk away"
4. Michael taught me how much our Israeli brothers and sisters appreciate the support of American Jews
As I heard from numerous Israelis this past August on the streets of Jerusalem: - "The Arabs

have 23 Arab states and 50 Muslim states on their side. All we have is you, the Jews of the Diaspora, especially of the USA."

Our cousin Aryeh along with our other cousins came all the way from Tel Aviv to Michael's funeral - In Aryeh's words: "Michael's family from America gave him to us in defense of our State --- The least we can do is to be there in support of his loved ones - We all feel like part of the Levin family"

Michael's saga moved Israeli souls. He was a paradigm of the Jewish state's perilous existence.

Israelis from all walks of life sought to touch and be touched by Michael's courage.

The El Al pilots and staff came forward **during the flight** to embrace our dear friends, the Levin family

Leaders among the Israeli tour guides came forward at the Unveiling: - "When we will give future tours of Har Herzl - Herzl, Rabin, Yoni Netanyahu, Hannah Senesh, and Michael

A few men approached Mark and Harriet: "We are Taxi drivers" - Mark responded, "that's nice, but we didn't call a cab" --- "No!" came the response. "We are here to say that all the taxi drivers of Jerusalem are here for you"

Bibi Netanyahu [whose brother Yoni died in battle in Entebbe] called the Levins and offered kind words of solidarity and friendship - as did dignitary after dignitary

The family and guests of a bar mitzva boy celebrating his milestone at our hotel for Shabbat August 4-5 turned their simchah into a time of offering comfort - so that the Levins could say the Kaddish prayers

A retired commander of Michael's paratrooper unit 890 walked ten miles on Shabbat morning to pray with us

Soldiers who were home for Shabbat came to our hotel to express solidarity with Michael's family -

Top generals visited the shiva. They indicated that Michael's story will not be forgotten. New inductees will visit his grave and learn of his bravery.

Teachers told us that Michael's story already is being related in the schools

The bakery on Ben Yehudah Street refused to take money from young people coming to pay their respects to the Levins. The bakery sent baked goods gratis for the shiva

Representing Israelis of all walks of life Israel's President Moshe Katsav conveyed personally to Mark and Harriet Levin: "I express deep consolation to you and to all of your relatives on behalf of the entire citizenry of the State"... Our hearts are with you."

5. Michael also taught us that Jewish peoplehood and identity are alive and well among the a precious segment of the youngest generation of Jews -

This past March, at the international Rabbinical Assembly Convention in Mexico City, Dr. Jack Wertheimer of Jewish Theological Seminary gave the rabbis a sense of alarm.

Data showed that with each subsequent decade of younger American Jews, ties to Israel grow noticeably weaker.

This disturbing trend is true yet also misleading.

Unaffiliated 20-Somethings from uninvolved homes do perceive themselves distant from Jewish peoplehood

Fortunately, however, young adults from engaged Jewish homes like the Levin home exhibit much more promising points of view

For example, in a recent [2003] survey of 1000 Conservative synagogue-affiliated college graduates conducted by JTS' Ratner Center, we learned

An impressive **sixty percent** of Conservative synagogue-affiliated 22-year-olds have visited Israel.

Eighty-nine percent assented that "I feel connected both to Israel and to the Jewish people."

"Ninety-eight percent affirmed that "I am proud to be a Jew."

Michael embodied the committed young men and women.

He went to Israel with USY Pilgrimage and with USY High School in Israel. He spent time in Ramah Israel Seminar. He participated in the United Synagogue's NATIV full-year Israel program

How proud we should be that dozens of our congregation's teenagers and young adults have spent time in Israel this past Jewish year with USY, Ramah, JCCs, UJC, Young Judea, Birth Right Israel and so forth.

How fantastic that 10 teenagers from our congregational family just returned this very week from a SSDS Upper School's 9th grade trip – 40 strong – to the Jewish State

And without my prompting, the Schechter delegation visited Michael's grave at Har Herzl. Why? Because he is a true Mitzvah Hero

1. Sheila and Les Lustbader dedicated a Mitzvah Heroes wall in our shul building - to promote Role Models for our youth to emulate
2. The first was David Gould, of blessed memory. David grew up in our congregation. Attended our religious school. He spent his adult life bringing technology to 3rd world countries - feeding the hungry - before dying tragically on Pan Am 103

3. Michael Levin, z"l, like David Gould - touched an incredible number of lives. His impact was far beyond anything he could have known
 4. Thousands attend the funeral. Countless numbers learned about the profile of Michael on Fox News and then CNN and in news stories -- Thousands more were present at the Memorial Service in Bucks County, PA. A vast correspondence ensued. An endless stream of the phone calls, internet posting and emails to the Levins
 5. Innumerable folks have told Mark and Harriet - just how powerfully Michael's personal qualities impacted upon their lives
 6. Michael taught us to be the best role models we can possibly be. From his example, we learn that you never know the impact you might make
 7. Michael's name will join that of David Gould, and be posted on our Mitzvah Hero Board -
As I conclude, I am reminded of a moment At Michael's Memorial Service in Bucks County - when a young American rabbi who had befriended and mentored Michael -- tied the themes of Michael's passionate commitments to God and Israel to the Rosh Hashanah liturgy
Teshuvah, Tefillah, Tzedakah -- repentance, prayer and generosity -
Teshuvah - SHUV - return **home** --Let's commit ourselves to visit Israel, to spend as much time there as possible
Tefillah - Let us pray for Israel's well-being, advocate for Israel's point of view, and keep Israel at the forefront of our identities
Tzedakah - Let us be generous in donating funds to support our MetroWest UJC emergency campaign, in buying Israeli products, and in supporting our annual CAI Israel walkathon on Sunday Oct 22 [please mark your calendars and partake]
 - h. Yehee Zichro Baruch - May the memory of Michael's courage and devotion remain as a blessing to us all
- And may the new year of 5767 be one of peace and security for the Jewish State, for all of us and our families - and let us say AMEN - Shana tova