

יום כיפור יזכור תשע"ט
YOM KIPPUR YIZKOR 5779
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The Talmud (Pes. 50a) tells the story of Rav Yosef, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who in the course of severe illness, had fallen into a coma. When he recovered, his father asked him: “מאי הזית – What did you see when you lay at death’s door?” He answered: “העליונים למטה והתחתונים למעלה – I saw a topsy turvy world. – Those exalted here – there, were lowly; those lowly here – there, were exalted.” Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: My son – עולם ברור ראית – you saw a clear world, a true world, the world the way it was meant to be.”

Sometimes our dreams, our visions that take us beyond our everyday reality, represent עולם ברור, the way our world should be. But as the *piyyut* ונתנה תקף reminds us, our lives can be “כהלום יעוף, like the dream that vanishes,” that eludes us, that remains forever beyond our grasp. But not always.

It was seventy-four years ago that Ida and her elder sister were forever separated from the remaining members of their once-large family, the day that the train bringing them and hundreds of their fellow Czechoslovakian Jews pulled into Auschwitz.

Ida’s story is retold by Yaffa Eliach in *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*.¹ It is a remarkable story of life set against a background of death.

Ida and her sister managed to survive months filled with horror. One night in the barracks, Ida heard a strange noise. She discovered a frightened young Jewish girl, who had escaped a round-up of children and was hiding. Ida immediately loved this

¹Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, 1982, pp. 134-140

little girl, whose name was Estherke. At that moment, she resolved to do everything in her power to save this precious young child. At enormous personal risk, Ida does just that, concealing Estherke and managing, somehow, to keep her alive, even to the extent of carrying her in a knapsack through a forced march several months later to Bergen Belsen. Ida thought no more of her personal survival, it was Estherke's life that had become her obsession.

The story is much more involved than the few details that I share with you today. Suffice it to say that somehow, through miracle or through determination or a combination of both, Estherke, Ida and Ida's sister all live to be liberated by the British in April of 1945. The three make it back to Czechoslovakia, and separate in searches for other members of their families. They arrange to meet in Prague, but Estherke fails to return. Ida searches, and searches, but to no avail. There is no clue as to Estherke's whereabouts. As heartbroken as Ida is at not finding Estherke, she refuses to forget her, always clinging to the hope that somewhere she will turn up.

Time passes, and Ida gets married. She and her husband move to the United States. Ida's sister settles with her husband in Israel. Some years later, Ida travels to Israel to visit her sister. During one particularly hot day in Israel, Ida faints in the street. Two Israeli soldiers take her in their jeep to the nearest hospital. The next day, they come to visit her, and a friendship develops. Upon her discharge from the hospital, Ida asks the soldiers what she can do for them to repay their kindness. The taller of the two, Yossi, tells Ida that the only repayment he wants is her presence at his wedding a few days later.

Ida comes to Jerusalem for the wedding. She scans the crowd and recognizes nobody. The wedding procession begins. Yossi enters. Soon the bride follows. She marches alone, an orphan of the Holocaust. Like the other guests, Ida leans forward to catch a glimpse of the *kallah*. She is stunned when she realizes the bride to be none other

than her precious long-lost Estherke. Estherke, too, recognizes Ida, and gestures to her to come forward and lead her to the *huppah*. And so, Yaffa Eliach records, “under the bright stars shining above the eternal city, Ida step[s] forward and [leads] her beloved Estherke to the bridal canopy.”²

For millennia, Jewish brides and grooms have been married through the words of expectation and hope of the Prophet Jeremiah: “יִשְׁמַע בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם: אַגַּיִן – אַחֲרֵי כָּל הָאֲדָוֶרֶת, הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים, הַמַּרְחָקִים לְעִירָה, הַהַרְסָה, הַפְּסָדִים – אַחֲרֵי כָּל אֵלֶּה – שָׁמָּה, בְּיָמֵינוּ, יִשְׁמָע בְּעִירֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם – הַקּוֹל הַשְּׂשׂוֹן וְהַקּוֹל הַשְּׂמֵחָה, קוֹל חַתָּן וְקוֹל כַּלָּה – הַקּוֹל הַשְּׂשׂוֹן וְהַקּוֹל הַשְּׂמֵחָה.” Who knows? It may have been the wedding of Yossi and Estherke that Jeremiah had in mind.

The story is told of a meeting, during the darkest days of the Second World War, between a general and a rabbi. Depressed by a series of Allied defeats, the general asked: “How are we ever going to win this war?” The rabbi responded: “We shall win by one of two ways. We shall win either by a miracle or we shall win in a natural way.”

The general then asked: “What would be the natural way?” The rabbi answered: “To win it by a miracle.” The general, puzzled by the rabbi’s strange answer, replied: “So what then would be the miracle?” The rabbi, smiling, answered: “To win it in a natural way.”³

Rabbi Samuel Schafler notes:

²Ibid., p. 140

³ Rabbi Samuel Schafler, Temple Gates of Prayer Bulletin, December 1969

That's the story of the State of Israel. In 1948, in 1956 and particularly in 1967, Israel defeated its enemies on the battlefield, naturally. And that was the miracle. Today we take this miracle for granted. We consider it the most natural thing in the world for Israel to have held off [all those armies, all those enemies, time and time again].⁴

As the decades pass, it is easy to lose sight of the miracle, of the success of the Zionist revolution in achieving עולם הפוך, in transforming the destiny of the Jew from victimhood to resounding success. It is easy to become caught up in today's challenges confronting Israel, the scourge of terrorism, the incessant anti-Semitism under the guise of anti-Zionism, the meeting of the extremes of far-left and far-right in demonizing the world's only Jewish state. It is also easy to be overcome by Israel's internal challenges, that may in truth be more threatening to Israel's future than any external danger. The increasingly powerful religious extremism, with enormous political clout threatens the very fabric of Israel society, highlighted in recent weeks by the arrest of Rabbi Dubi Hayyun of Haifa, a wonderful *mentsh* whom I know well, for performing a wedding outside of the ultra-Orthodox framework. Dubi's arrest created a firestorm in Israel, since most of the country wants a more tolerant society and religious alternatives to hard-right Orthodoxy, such as that offered by our own Masorti Movement. As well, the fights over *Ezrat Yisrael*, the egalitarian portion of the Kotel that our movement controls, the push for the ability to marry outside of the Orthodox orbit, the struggle to undo the blanket exemptions of Hareidim from military service and to require some form of national service of all of Israel's citizens, the battles being waged over the right of stores to open on Shabbat, and many other controversies engulfing our beloved Israel, suggest a distancing between the miracle of her founding and the struggles of the moment.

⁴ *ibid.*

I won't understate the seriousness of many of these controversies. In my recently-concluded role as Rabbinical Assembly president, I was directly involved in many of these issues, enduring several lengthy Knesset meetings with Ministers and Knesset members, some sympathetic, others less so, to our concerns.

But maybe the miracle is reflected in today's controversies. All accounts of the very first Zionist Congress, 120 years ago in Basel, reflect the huge infighting and difficulty of achieving consensus, and the deep frustration felt by Theodor Herzl. Yet, nonetheless, leaving those historic meetings, Herzl would record in his diary how, there, in Basel, the Jewish State was born.

Sometimes it is natural for the bad news to overtake the good, for the harsh, unpleasant nitty-gritty to prevail over the underlying outstanding success and achievement.

My childhood friend and Hebrew school classmate of many decades ago, now one of the world's leading public intellectuals, Harvard's Steven Pinker, in his new book *Enlightenment Now*, discusses the tendency to overlook the good because of the bad. He writes:

News is about things that happen, not things that don't happen. We never see a journalist saying to the camera, "I'm reporting live from a country where a war has not broken out." – or a city that has not been bombed, or a school that has not been shot up. As long as bad things have not vanished from the face of the earth, there will always be enough incidents to fill the news, especially when billions of smartphones turn most of the world's population into crime reporters and war correspondents.... Bad things can happen, but good things aren't built in a day, and as they unfold, they will be out of sync with the news cycle.⁵

⁵Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 2018, p. 41.

So let's look for the good news. I assume that most, if not all of you, have heard of *SodaStream*, the Israeli company manufacturing home sparkling-water makers, that was just bought by Pepsi for \$3.2 billion. So significant was this acquisition that just weeks later, PepsiCo's largest competitor, Coca Cola acquired the British Costa coffee chain, since both companies have felt the need to move away from the diminishing sugared-drinks business.

But it is the backstory of SodaStream that is most significant. SodaStream was the target of BDS boycotters world-wide for several years, because one of the company's plants was situated in Maale Edumim, a bedroom suburb of Jerusalem, but across the green line, a so-called settlement. I had the occasion to visit the Maale Edumim factory a few years ago, and was struck by the cordial, friendly atmosphere between the several hundred Palestinian workers and the Israeli staff. All the employees were paid equivalent wages, meaning that Palestinian workers earned exactly the same income as the Israelis. A hot lunch was provided to all workers, which happened to be both *hallal* and *glatt* kosher. SodaStream in Maale Edumim was a model of success for Israeli-Palestinian interaction.

But years of protest took their toll, and SodaStream eventually closed the plant and built a new one in the Negev. Daniel Birenbaum, the CEO of SodaStream, is active in Israel's Masorti movement. His father Erwin Birenbaum, a colleague of mine, still functions as an active Conservative rabbi in Netanya, at the age of 90. Both Danny and I serve on the board of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. At a meeting a couple of years ago, Danny Birenbaum was seated next to me. The Maale Edumim plant had closed not long before, so during a break I asked Danny if anything had changed in terms of BDS protests since the closing. One would have thought that the protesters' goal having been achieved, they would have moved on to another cause. But no, Danny informed me, nothing had changed. Now the BDS movement was

protesting the new plant in the Negev arguing falsely that it was built on stolen Bedouin territory.

But this summer's acquisition of SodaStream by PepsiCo proved that BDS ultimately is irrelevant. SodaStream is a huge commercial success, and PepsiCo is maintaining its presence in Israel, and its identity as an Israeli product.

One more thing about SodaStream. At the press conference in Israel announcing the sale, with Daniel Birenbaum and the CEO of PepsiCo and the world's financial media present, Daniel introduced his father, the rabbi. He also shared his father's story. Erwin Birenbaum, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary, had arrived in Israel on the *Exodus*. In other words, a penniless survivor arrives in Israel as a teenager, and his son, seventy years later, is the CEO of a multi-billion dollar Israeli corporation.

Those of us who can think back some thirty, forty or fifty years ago, and those whose memories go back to the beginnings of Israeli statehood and even before, will remember how, in those earlier years, one did not often hear Israel and NASDAQ or the S&P 500 spoken of in the same sentence, or even the same paragraph. That earlier lackluster financial history was reflected in Golda Meir's dialogue fifty years ago with U.S. President Richard Nixon during a state visit to Washington. Nixon, in jest, told Golda that he wanted to trade generals with her, that he would take General Dayan, General Rabin and General Bar-Lev. Before he could finish the thought, Golda jumped in and said: "That's fine, and we'll take General Motors, General Dynamics and General Electric."

Twenty-some years earlier, in the months leading up to the proclamation of the State, Golda Meir had traveled to the U.S. at the behest of David ben Gurion, on an urgent fund-raising mission. Her first appearance was before the Council of Jewish

Federations and Welfare Funds in Chicago, a group not at that time known for its Zionist sympathies. Warned that at best, she would be able to raise about five million dollars, she knew that she would have to do a lot better than that. Without having had a chance to prepare her speech, without being scheduled, and without being introduced, Golda Meir approached the microphone and spoke briefly and to the point. She told the assembled that the Jews in the land of Israel intended to fight to the end, with stones if necessary. She told them that within the next few weeks, they needed to raise some thirty million dollars. She told them again that the decision had been made to fight, but that those seated before her would be making a decision as well. Their dollars would determine whether the Jews or the Arabs would win the fight.

Golda's words captured the moment. The audience, deeply moved, took up her challenge. In six weeks in the United States, Golda Meir raised fifty million dollars for the new Jewish army, making it possible to purchase tanks, planes and guns to fight the war that was so immanent.⁶

Those days are behind us, for which we thank God, and for which we acknowledge the brave men and women and children, who have fought and continue to fight the battles on the front-lines, and those whose intellect, risk-taking, creativity, technical and financial acumen, has led Israel from years of impoverishment to her standing today as the start-up nation, with a thriving economy and stunning growth at every measurable level.

Many of you remember those early years, when Israel's endurance was far from assured. I am old enough to remember the fear that permeated the Jewish world in the weeks prior to the Six-Day War, when Israel's ability to survive was at question, and the great relief and celebration following that incredible victory, which

⁶Source unknown

transformed us into a far more confident people, proud of our identity and relentlessly advocating on behalf of our fellow Jews in distress and vigorously lobbying our political leaders to stand by us in ways they had failed to do just a couple of decades earlier.

So this Yom Kippur day you are not being rallied, as once was the case, to rescue the Jewish State from distress, to provide the means for Israel to survive. Thank God, we have long passed those fearful days. We have been witness to the transformation of עולם הפוך, an imagined better world for Jews, into עולם ברור, into a new reality of strength, self-reliance and achievement.

Our Israel Bond Appeal today is not a rescue mission. It is an act of involvement, of participation. It is our joining hands with one of human history's greatest success stories, investing in a thriving country, in being part of the manifestation of the emergence of the Jewish nation משמחה, from agony to joy, מאפילה לאורה, from darkness to light, מאבל ליום טוב, from mourning to celebration.

Some of those precious souls for whom *Yizkor* is about to be said, could only have dreamt of a time when Jews would be free to exercise their Jewish selves. They could only have dreamt of a time when there would again be Jewish sovereignty, when we would be free, independent, strong, in our own land. We who are living the dream of those who came before us owe it to them to remain worthy of what was achieved through their prayers, their tears, their love, their dedication.

We praise the Almighty שהחיינו וקימנו והגיענו לזמן הזמן הזה, who has enabled us to reach this moment in time and to be of the Jewish generations fortunate enough to have a land we can call our own.