

***Parashi'ot Acharei Mot/Kedoshim***

**Rabbi Neil Cooper**

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All trips to Israel are special. This trip was particularly special for Lori and me as we celebrated the birth and bris of our 5<sup>th</sup> grandchild in Israel, *Evan Ziv Yisrael*.

There was something else that was special about this trip. The birth and bris coincided with two days in particular which, in Israel, are filled with emotion, meaning and introspection. Both days are distinguished by sirens which mark the days' observances.

On the first of these days, *Yom HaShoah*, the siren stops the entire nation and calls on all of its people to remember, in silence, the six million of our people killed by the Nazis during WWII. A few days later, the second siren is heard. That siren marks the beginning of *Yom HaZikaron*, the day when a nation remembers all of those who have died in defense of the State of Israel, from 1948 to the present, all 23,230 people. There are ceremonies in every community, town and city, as well as 24 hours of TV and radio programming dedicated to telling stories and sharing insights about those who were killed, mostly young men and women, who died as soldiers.

I have been in Israel in the past for *Yom HaZikaron*. I have listened to stories, attended the ceremonies. But this year was different for me because Lori and I attended a ceremony sponsored by an organization known as "*Risisim*"\*. I had not heard of *Risisim* previously. I learned about it because my son, Yonatan, had done some volunteer work for them.

In Hebrew, *Risisim* means shrapnel. When a bomb, a grenade, an RPG explodes, it is the metal fragments which become the deadly projectiles. But when a bomb explodes, in addition to the people killed, there is often a larger group of those hit by the shrapnel but who are not killed. And, so, in the history of the State of Israel, beginning in 1948, 23,320 people have been killed in defending Israel against her neighbors. One might legitimately ask, however, where is the accounting of those who have been hit by shrapnel but did not die? They are not counted among the 23, 320 who were killed. But, truth be told, that shrapnel of war, which is often carried inside the bodies of its victims, permanently imbedded in them, remains is a living reminder of death and war.

But there is another kind of shrapnel, not the shrapnel which sprays in every direction from an exploding bomb, but emotional, psychological shrapnel which also becomes imbedded, which also cannot be removed from its victims. Shrapnel of this sort represents the pain, anguish and trauma which is carried by nearly every person in Israel. Call it psychological trauma, anxiety or PTSD, I do not believe that there is a person living in Israel that does not carry some of that shrapnel.

After returning from his service in the IDF as a paratrooper, my son was not prepared for the shrapnel which he brought home. He had not been killed, thank God. He and his team of fighters all returned alive, physically uninjured and, ostensibly untouched. And yet, there was shrapnel, the spew of fighting, war and bloodshed which splashes on everyone and everything, whether or not its dosage is lethal. The “spray of war” the shrapnel which touches not only soldiers but their families is the focus of *Risisim*.

At 8:00 on the eve of Yom *HaZikaron* a siren would sound and the country would, again, stand at attention. The ceremony arranged for by *Risisim* was held in an old hospital, now used as a gathering place for a variety of events. We came early to get our seats. And we waited for nearly an hour before the siren would be sounded. We did not know what to expect or who would attend. That would become clear later.

As the outdoor courtyard began to fill, I was struck by the eclectic nature of the group: religious and secular, children and parents and some grandparents. There was no obvious common denominator we could find which would explain why those who came were there. The night was cold and the fact that the space filled before 8:00 pm created a supportive warmth between the strangers who had gathered. We stood in silence as the siren called us to attention. After that, the program began.

The introduction was given by one of the founders and leaders of this grassroots organization. He explained that the purpose of this organization is to provide a safe space for people to share feelings, thoughts and pains which they carried. There was nothing political which would be presented. This was not the time for opinions about the government. This was a time to share stories and feelings, to expose some of the shrapnel of war. And the stories began.

A former commander spoke about what it meant to him to be a commander during the Cast Lead Operation two years ago. He was sent to lead his men, not into Gaza, but into Jenin, a West Bank Palestinian town which is known for its radicalized population. His soldiers had been sent in to keep the peace, fearing that more violence would erupt there in response to the war in Gaza. And, as the young

soldiers walked through the street, they were caught in an ambush. The fighting ensued and continued through the night. By the morning, the attackers had been killed. But it was up to the commander to identify the wounded and the dead: which ones were IDF soldiers, terrorists and “others”. Laid out before him, each covered with a blanket, he identifies his men by their boots. The horror of that task and that foray into Jenin occupied a place of permanent residence in the thoughts of the young, kibbutznik Commander.

Another speaker: a soldier who witnessed the deaths of most of his fellow soldiers in his regiment suffered from a survival guilt, of sorts. He had survived, he said, “but I just don’t know why. And I don’t know what to do with my life because I survived”.

And then a mother spoke: she had two sons who had gone to war. During the three weeks of the war her sons were in Gaza. There was no communication between those inside and those outside of Gaza. And as the days went by, the mother worried more and more. Other soldiers she knew had come out and were fine. Why did not either of her sons contact her? Had they been captured like Gilad Shalit or had they been killed? She went to her sons’ bedrooms in the house. The rooms felt cold, as if they had been abandoned by those who would never return. She waited by the phone. She paced. She tried to tend to her other children but could not focus.

In the end, there was a knock at her door. This was the moment she had both anticipated and feared: the moment when she would open the door: if she saw two IDF officers standing before her, she would know that they had been sent to deliver a devastating message about her sons. She opened the door. Standing in front of her was her older son. She hugged him with all of her might. They both cried. But what about her other son? He did not return. He had been killed.

What is the proper response of a mother when one son lives but the other does not? The mother asked. What joy can you express to your son who is alive when your other son is dead? How does one rejoice at the safe return of one without the other? How does one mourn if one’s prayers have been partially answered? And on and on the questions would not stop. The woman spoke for a long while, posing more questions than providing answers. She was grateful to *Risisim*, a place where she could speak, ask and not be required to answer or solve.

In the Torah reading this morning there is a verse which is quite puzzling: (Lev. 17:13 p. 687):

*And if any Israelite... hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.*

From the earliest times of the Bible, our ancestors have had an aversion to blood: *Ki ha-dam hu ha-nefesh*/ blood is life. And so the Torah instructs that when one wants to eat meat or fowl, the animal must be slaughtered in a particular way and the blood must be buried.

Rabbi Joseph Albo, the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish scholar and author of: *The Book of Principles/ Sefer Halkkarim* points out that this mitzvah, "*Kisuy Dam*" was instituted in order to create within us a sense of embarrassment and regret over the killing of an animal for food. Without this sense of regret, he points out, we become callous, "emotionally closed" without a sense of remorse for having taken a life, even an animal's life. The covering of blood is a reminder of regret and even embarrassment over the fact that we choose to take a life in order to sustain our own.

The ceremony and testimonies orchestrated by ***Risisim*** made a powerful point. The shrapnel strikes everyone in its path. And even though some may live after being hit, they are also all casualties, they are all victims, and they all feel the pain, the anguish, the horror of spilled blood.

The laws of kashrut may require that the blood be covered with dirt, but for those who are touched by the blood of Israel's wars, that interred blood is uncovered from time to time. It is locked in our hearts. That blood remains there, covered, most of the time. But on ***Yom HaZikaron***, the blood is laid bare, uncovered. Through sharing the stories created by the blood of war, those who have been carry emotional shrapnel can begin to heal.

***Risisim*** cannot be buried all of the time. One may pretend that the blood is not there, that the shrapnel did not touch them. At ***Risisim***, however, on that cold Jerusalem night, the blood and the pain was uncovered. In the process of sharing the stories, those present honored the lives of their soldiers. But they were there mostly for themselves. ***Risisim*** has given them the opportunity to share, reveal, reflect and, hopefully, to heal.

War, in Israel, is a necessary part of life. And blood, which represents life, has been, and will be, spilled. But, in founding ***Risisim***, its founders realized a profound truth. The blood of animals is similar to the blood of war and human death. The blood which flows as a result of war, also represents life and, most specifically, a life lost. But the process of burying that blood is more complicated. It cannot simply be

covered with dirt. This blood must be uncovered. It must be held. This blood must be acknowledged and this blood must be made sacred. The mothers and fathers, spouses and siblings, in this small country grieving the loss of those they loved, carry this blood together. It is the blood which has been shed, in order that the State of Israel to live, which gives our lives purpose and resolve. That blood is never forgotten. Even when it is buried, it remains with us.

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\*To learn more about **Risisim**, go to: [www.risisim.org](http://www.risisim.org)