

Yizkor 5774

It was lunchtime. I was at home in our kitchen. Seven and a half years old. Quite possibly it was boiled chicken and rice leftovers from the night before – with mushroom sauce and apple puree. The radio was on. News broadcasts and the Archers were holy institutions in the Lawrence household.

It was Yom Kippur and I had been brought back after the Yizkor service. Zeddy and I were the only ones eating. Mummy and Daddy had brought me home. We'd head back to shul for Mincha and Jonah or Neilah.

And the news came on. Israel was under attack. The Egyptian forces had crossed the Suez Canal. The Syrians had crossed the ceasefire lines into the Golan.

Daddy took the news back to Marble Arch shul. The Chazzan and choir led the prayers, the Rabbi, whose father had just retired after a decade as Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel stood stern and solemn by the Aron Kodesh. The congregation whispered the frightening report from one pew to the next. And Israeli soldiers were responding with an emergency full mobilisation.

Over the next twenty days almost 2,800 Israeli soldiers were killed in action. There were about 8,800 casualties and 293 Israelis captured. The dead and wounded represented three in every thousand Israelis. Scarcely a family was unaffected by loss.

Forty years on, with Israel apprehensive about the same neighbours, there and in shuls around the world the anniversary is being commemorated; the fallen remembered and the desecration of our Holy day lamented. Incidentally, in Syria and in Egypt it is known as the Ramadan war in celebration of the holy act and season of their aggression.

Yom Kippur of 1973 is the first Yom Kippur that I can remember distinctly. My memory of the mood of those nineteen days is almost certainly my first real emotional connection with Israel. My Jewishness took on a wider sense of identity than the songs, the stories and the blessings we learned in Sunday school.

The Yeshiva that Rafi attended, Yeshivat Har Etziyon was founded in 1968 by Rav Yehuda Amital, one of the great Torah personalities of the twentieth century. He was born in Hungary and survived the Holocaust in forced labour details. His mother was killed in Auschwitz on arrival in May 1944. His father was killed by a Nazi doctor in Mauthausen who injected him with benzene. Yehuda, 20 years old arrived in Palestine, studied, married, became a Rabbi. On the Shabbat morning after the State was declared and the war to destroy it was also declared, he boarded the bus to the Tel Hashomer assembly point. The Israeli chief rabbinate had made a public announcement permitting travel on Shabbat to enlist. He fought at Latrun with immigrants freshly off the boats, trying to keep open the critical access road to Jerusalem.

Rav Amital became one of the pioneering Rabbis of the Hesder Yeshiva movement, encouraging orthodox students to attend Yeshiva and serve in the IDF, many in elite combat units. In 1973 the Yeshiva was in its sixth year. It had 200 students. Many of them were called up during the Yom Kippur service itself. Over the next twenty days eight of his students died.

Rav Amital wrote to the Yeshiva “Our hearts are torn eight times, tears that will never be mended... who can express our grief? Who can count our tears? Who can measure our pain?” He stopped teaching for a while and travelled to visit his students at the Front.

His biography, “By Faith Alone” tells of these visits. “In his travels to the front, Rav Amital found some healing for his wounded soul. Wherever he went he encouraged his students, but he also drew strength from them. Once, on a radio show, he recounted the experience of his first encounter with his combat-soldier students, during a lull between battles:

“We came to them as Rashei Yeshiva, but there were moments that we were cut down to size in their presence, and we stood like students before their masters, awestruck by their greatness... we stood dumbfounded in the presence of students who, a few days earlier, were engaged in resolving the Talmudic debates ... and clarifying Talmudic discussions, and now they were waging war with all their heart and soul, believing that they were indeed fighting God’s wars and that God was fighting for them. I would not be exaggerating if I said that we felt that we were breathing the air of the Tanakh.”

Soldiers remarked at Rav Amital’s visits. Most army Rabbis who came to military bases made straight for the kitchen to re-kasher the cutlery and to the prayer-room to restock the prayer books, they worried that the army wasn’t looking after their students’ religious wellbeing. Rav Amital sat with them and ate with them. He embraced them and gathered them together and gave them a shiur. He’d speak about the importance of military service. With regard to kashrut he trusted they would manage. He didn’t come to make or solve halachic problems. He came to speak to his students and to be with them.

It is said that Rav Aron Lichtenstein, the current Rosh Yeshiva would turn up at the military bases and give a shiur. He’d bring the Yeshiva to the army. When Rav Amital came to a base he gave a short dvar Torah, words of encouragement. He brought a whiff of home.

A decade ago, Rav Amital spoke at the 30 year commemoration of the Yom Kippur war at the Mount Herzl military cemetery.

There he said:

At the memorial service held for the yeshiva’s fallen, I made a supreme effort to characterize each and every one of them. It wasn’t simple. I labored hours upon hours to know and remember all of them. I tried, and I was more or less successful. The families can tell you. But I want to tell you: I internalized everything. It became part of my personality. They live inside me. God, Knower of thoughts, Examiner of hearts, knows that there are elements of my personality that I internalized from what I remembered of them. I have been passing them onward for thirty years now, and so these elements yet live. In this respect, they are my teachers. My personality has been enriched.

There is a small measure of comfort, he continued, in the fact that the fallen have become part of the personalities of those who knew them:

Fifty years ago, I knew an old man, a Holocaust survivor, in Rehovot. He came to me and begged me to procure a tape recorder for him. “Why do you need a tape recorder?” I asked him. He replied,

“I’m the only one who remembers a certain tune for Tefilat Tal, the Prayer for Dew. If I pass on, nobody will know the tune.” The tune is still playing. Don’t take it lightly. As someone who passed through the abyss of the Holocaust, I say to you: Tens of thousands of people perished together with their memories...Those who fell in the Yom Kippur War left a book of memories that is occasionally opened. They live on within us, and we pass on everything we learned from them.

Today, Yom Kippur, Yizkor in Sydney, we cherish the memories of those who passed before. As we remember them they do live on in us. We remember their songs. We remember their sayings. Just recently my mother channeled one of my Oma’s pieces of wisdom: “Besser ein Ende mit Schrecken als ein Schrecken ohne Ende” Better a painful ending to something than a pain without an end.

As I hear it, I hear her voice, I see her face, I feel her warmth. I remember her guidance. I remember her love. Her hopes for me. To be a mensch. While today is about a picture of God looking at my deeds and scrutinising my performance – if I want to do some spiritual recalibration I need only imagine being accountable to Oma; facing her compassion and her admonition. She knew me inside out.

Oh Oma, How do I measure up?

The Yizkor service cuts both ways. Not only do we evoke the memories, but we call on God to remember them, to give them peace and to bless us in their merit. In the Amida prayer and at the beginning of successive piyyutim, God is Elokaynu v-Elokay Avotaynu – Our God, but also the God of our ancestors. He is God the Creator, God of History, Supreme Legislator and Judge. He is God. But he is also the God of our ancestors – of Abraham and Isaac and of Jacob, of Moses, King David... and my Oma... and me.

He is the God that Abraham remonstrated with over Sodom and Gemorrah. He is the God that Isaac confronted demanding self-sacrifice and then with a wayward son. He is the God that Jacob wrestled with and Moses pleaded with. He is the God who let Moses come to the threshold of the Promised Land but He wouldn’t let him in. He is the God who elevated David from shepherd to King, but He denied David, our great Psalmist, the chance to build the Temple. The God of our ancestors had a relationship with each of our ancestors – and in each hallowed generation he has left work undone for the next generation to complete.

Our ancient selichot service remembers the exile in Egypt, the destruction of the Temple and the Lions’ Den. Our Mussaf adds the gory fate of our Martyrs at the times of the Romans and Bar Kochba. The Piyyutim, the Kol Nidrei service and Unetane Tokef were composed in eras of forced conversion and disputation. At Yizkor, European communities recited elegies to victims of recent and distant pogroms. Today we recite memorial prayers for the rabbis who composed those very elegies and for their families who perished just seventy years ago. From slave labour and wild beasts, beheadings, burnings, dismemberment and gassings – even the cruel injection of benzene... our bodies have been taken, our lives have been taken, whole communities have been taken – and although it has been shaken our collective faith and national will to be has not been taken.

Rav Amital, like many survivors who went on to become Rabbis was often challenged how he could believe in God after all he had seen. To the ultra-religious and anti-Zionist who tried to portray the Shoah as some Divine punishment he railed “A million children were murdered in the Holocaust –

the worst kind of paganism wouldn't deserve a punishment like that. Nothing can justify the murder and incineration... there can be no answer to that question." But when he was asked why he persisted in his faith he responded as follows, "had I lost my faith, would I have answers? Would the phenomenon be more understandable, clearer?" In words with which I wrestle – but it is the honest testimony of a survivor, he would say, "I saw God's hand... but I didn't know what it meant."

Earlier this year Shira visited Auschwitz. Just as I wrote Rafi a poem two years ago, I wrote to Shira and I share my words for her with you:

The Contrasts And Contexts Resonate.

The contrasts and contexts resonate.
 You arrived by plane; your departure date is known.
 Those who came before by train
 Had no plans.
 Could make no plans.

You arrive as a tourist.
 To see and to learn.
 It *happened* to others.
 They felt it
 Then felt no more.

You are an Israeli.
 For others it was a dream
Lehiyot am chofshi be-artzenu

Perhaps you don't know where is home;
 Born in Israel,
 Raised in England,
 Educated in New Zealand and Australia.

While your great great-grandparents
 Were born and raised in Poland.
 Or Germany or Russia.
 And *that* was home.
 And proudly so.
 Till they were disowned.
 Disavowed as nationals.
 Even as human beings.
 Where you stand now.
 Living, breathing, hoping, praying,
 Reduced to dust and ash.
 Perhaps a speck beneath your feet
 Or airborne to inhale
 The matter or the vapour
 Of their incineration.

Perhaps a blade of grass

Or a flower catches your eye.
Fertilized by innocent, spilled, martyred blood.

Separated by time and circumstance
And yet so close.

As you walk by the way,
In your heart and in your soul
Remember them.

Know, that while you live
They are not entirely lost.

Know, that as you strive
To better our world
The sorrow of the past
Yields to the fulfilled hope of our future.

Lehiyot am chofshi be-artzenu

Know, the God in whom they placed their trust
Continues to sustain our being
His word informs our daily lives.
His wisdom inspires.
From the moment of your inception
Nourishing your every moment.

Know, that while the contrasts and the contexts resonate
Quiddity,
The quality, the being of you,
Transcends both place and time.

It's Yom Kippur Yizkor in Australia. 2013. 5774.

The 9th September was the seventieth anniversary of my great grandfather's deportation to Auschwitz.

It's forty years since the Yom Kippur War; the Egyptians and the Syrians breaking the peace, crossing over the ceasefire lines; my father breaking the news to Marble Arch shul.

It is true that today former students and congregants of mine are in yeshiva and are on guard duty protecting those same borders. And it is true that today Shira and her friends on year schemes in Israel are awaiting the distribution of gas masks... Just in case...

But it is a better world now than we have known heretofore. We live with opportunities that our ancestors read of in ancient prophecy and saw only in their dreams. We have every freedom to be and to believe. To live, to grow, to learn, to build and to strengthen. We live in the first century where Jews can become and are not forced to run...

As the prayers of two millennia are answered, will we blinker ourselves to God's hand? Will we let the learning and the tunes of our heritage lapse into forgotten mists? Will we dishonour the

memory of the martyrs and the defenders of our people and of our faith? Or will we have the courage to draw on Jewish wisdom and tradition to make our family life richer, our community bonds stronger, our society more just and our world one of beauty and of blessing and of peace?

It is my Yizkor prayer that we measure up to the expectations of our God and the God of our ancestors. That we be worthy bearers of their flame and of their name. And that in their turn, in the Yom Kippurs that will follow, our own children will look upon our contribution with respect and with pride.

Wishing you all a Gmar Chatima Tova