

“Israel Lives Within Us”

It was October 6, 1973, the 10th day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei. Egypt and Syria launched a coordinated military attack against Israel. It was Yom Kippur day. Israel was supposed to be at worship, not war. Though battle tested in the Six-Day War in 1967, it was a terrible risk to be virtually unaware and unprepared for war on the holiest day of the year. The stunning effects of the war were felt in the immediate responses that called every able-bodied Israeli to defend the young nation. According to the Hebrew calendar, today is the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War in Israel’s 75th year of sovereignty.

So we reflect on the significance of this day to us, and to remember where we were on that day, 50 years ago. In 1973, I suspect that some of you were sitting here, in these seats. By the time Yom Kippur began in Houston, it was already eight hours into the war that began earlier that day in Israel. Perhaps Rabbi Schachtel shared words of concern and hope for the Jews who were running to Israel’s aid. Perhaps prayers were spoken for the well-being of the region and the peace of the world, which stood in the balance. The raging relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and their allies in Israel and the Arab world, respectively, meant danger beyond the boundaries of the Middle East.

For Israel, it was an existential moment. It was another test of its resolve and our people’s commitment to its survival after three previous wars. The wars of 1948, 1956, and 1967 were excruciating for a young and relatively ill-equipped nation, but could Israel emerge victorious a fourth time, on Yom Kippur? Call it what you will, it was nothing short of a miracle. Israeli soldiers rose to the occasion and saved Israel.

The times that followed were filled with analyses and reviews about how it happened and who would be held responsible. It’s not a coincidence that books and a movie about Golda Meir have appeared recently. Like other stories about this period in Israel’s history, the book by Deborah Lipstadt, which I recommend, and the movie called “Golda,” which I have yet to see, are insights into the heart and soul of Golda. She remains the woman without whom Israel’s birth, resilience, and endurance would have been recorded much differently.

In Lipstadt’s book, she recalled an occasion in 1961, when David Ben Gurion, meeting a group of foreign students, made a personal statement about Golda Meir. About her passion for Israel, he said to them, **“Lives inside her the Holocaust.”**

The failure Golda felt about not being able to save more Jews from the Holocaust led her to say before the Knesset, “We were weak, we did not have influence, we did not have a state...We did what we could according to our power, and it was not much.”

“Lives inside her the Holocaust,” would be foreshadow of Golda’s life’s work that pressed her to make Israel’s future a matter of the Jewish people’s will and determination. Ben Gurion’s comment about Golda prompts me to ask, on the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, “What lives inside of you? What lives inside of me?” I’ll answer first.

In 1973, when Israel went to war on Yom Kippur, I was just 11-years-old. I listened to adults around me talk about Israel’s fight for its life. I wondered what that place, so far away, had to do with the Chicago suburb where I lived. My rabbi, Hillel Gamoran, and my parents protected the children from news of the war. But their efforts made me increasingly curious to know. As I grew, I always listened to others talk about their visit to Israel, their studies in Israel, and what they were doing for Israel. Through high school and college, for lack of funds, I was unable to go to Israel. I often felt like I was left behind. My only exposure to Israel, Hebrew language, and immersive Jewish life was Jewish summer camp. It was a great recreational Jewish experience, but not the real thing I hoped to know.

Later, when I prepared for my first year in rabbinical school at HUC, in Jerusalem, I felt like it was finally my turn to go to Israel; it would be totally immersive for the next 10 months. Though some first-year students arrived two months earlier in the summer, it turned out, that all the Hebrew studies I gained before I arrived in Israel, caused me to be exempt from summer studies. Finally, I arrived in the fall. It was time for the High Holy Days...in Israel!

On Rosh Hashanah, I was invited to spend time with a classmate and his Israeli relatives in Rishon LeZion, a rather nice neighborhood. Excited to be observing Rosh Hashanah with an Israeli family, I came to learn that they were secular Israelis. On Rosh Hashanah, we didn’t go to synagogue; we went to the beach, instead. I remember wondering --- what I was doing there? But when Sukkot, the Festival of Booths, arrived five days after Yom Kippur, I walked through the streets of my neighborhood in Jerusalem. Nearly every balcony on the apartment buildings was transformed into a Sukkah, to fulfill the mitzvah to dwell in a Sukkah for seven days. I was mesmerized. Likewise, Chanukah was a city-wide festival of lights and hot jelly doughnuts. By springtime of my year in Israel, I was speaking and dreaming in Hebrew. I even thought that if I couldn’t return home, for any odd reason, I could be at home in Israel. My family, on the other hand, was eager for my return.

I came home with more than souvenirs for them. I came home with something in my heart, too. To be Jewish without reservation; to walk and talk and thrive with Jews every day; and to know that this land was my home, too, became part of me. After 2000 years of exile from the land, the horrors of the Holocaust, and a mostly indifferent world that wouldn’t give refuge to homeless European Jews, returning to establish a sovereign nation in 1948, and to defend it constantly, has become an endless pursuit to never, ever, relinquish the right of return to our ancestral land in Israel, first promised to our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Of Golda Meir it was said, “Lives inside of her the Holocaust.” So, what lives inside of me? “Lives inside of me Jewish self-determination.” Now, what lives inside of you?

For those who wrestled with the birth of Israel in the 1940s, and watched its soldiers fight for its survival in subsequent wars, Israel's 75th anniversary must be something of a wonder, too. The birth of nations always begins with struggles and many challenges to its rights to exist. The United States is no different. America's 247 years of independence are meager compared to the years of some of the world's nations in history. A true story --- an Israeli-born American rabbi who studied American history in college and excelled in the subject was asked by his professor how he could recall well over 200 years of American history with such detail and know the subject so comprehensively? The young student, at the time, replied that he was Jewish and "Jews have to remember over 3000 years of history."

As Americans and Jews, we find perspective in these facts, and have learned not to take anything for granted. About democracy, Winston Churchill famously remarked:

"Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...." Winston S Churchill, 11 November 1947

Today, we are relieved that Israel still relies on democracy in favor of "all other forms that have been tried." But judicial reform in Israel is creating a schism between the people. I am not going to posit an opinion about Israeli politics. I am going to urge us to put nation ahead of party politics. We have to ensure that what we have fought to gain, personally, or advocated to strengthen from afar, collectively, concludes in an enduring Jewish future in Israel.

In the existential moments that Golda Meir faced, she said, in a conversation with President John F. Kennedy:

"If we should lose our sovereignty again, those of us who would remain alive --- and there wouldn't be very many --- would be dispersed once more. But we no longer have that great reservoir we once had of our religion, our culture and our faith. We lost much of that when six million perished in the Holocaust...What is written on the wall for us is, "Beware of losing your sovereignty again, for this time you may lose it forever."

Then she said to the president, "Should the state be lost, then my generation would go down in history as the generation that made Israel sovereign again, but didn't know how to hold on to that independence."

In her book, Lipstadt writes that Kennedy looked into her eyes and said, "I understand, Mrs. Meir. Don't worry. *Nothing* will happen to Israel." That was then.

Last spring, Rabbi Daniel Gordis was our guest. His scholarship and intimate understanding of Israel's growing pains and internal strife was instructive. He left us with many lessons, chief among them, he said, "Everything we love is flawed." The only exception might be a person in our life whom we call perfect; but even the most beautiful rose sits atop a most undeserved thorny stem, right? And so it is with Israel. It is magnificent in its ability to emerge and thrive in the midst of a most undeserved hostile neighborhood around its borders, and now within them, too. It's enough to repel us, but, who said that "love of Israel" meant it had to be perfect, any more than anything else we love? Israel is imperfect and still we can love Israel.

Today, we worry about the rise of unaffected young people regarding Israel, but some young people strive to love Israel and her flaws. I learned about a high school student who's discovering Israel. He could go straight to college and anticipate a prosperous career, but his Jewish values have raised a question in him. How can he do more than study about Judaism and Israel? How can he lend his hands to Israel's strength and future? He's looking for a gap year in Israel to serve as a volunteer, to strengthen communities, and along the way to learn Hebrew, Israeli culture, and deeper means of Jewish identification. If I asked him, "What lives inside of you?" he might reply, "Lives inside me Israel's vision." Like the prophet Joel, who said, "The old shall dream dreams, and the youth shall see visions" (Joel 2:28). When he comes home from Israel, he'll have much more to say and do with us for Israel's sake.

If you struggle to identify what lives within you, then consider these facts from Jewish history. Rabbi Daniel Gordis wrote in his book, "Impossible Takes Longer," that even as we celebrate Israel's 75th anniversary, "eight decades had been deadly the last two times the Jewish people had been sovereign in the Land of Israel." The first time, he notes, the Jews were united and sovereign under King David, and then under his son, King Solomon. But a challenger battled Solomon for control and the kingdom split into two; both halves fell to foreign invaders. Finally, in 586 BCE, the Babylonians conquered Judea and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish state lasted fewer than 80 years.

Under Cyrus, the king of Persia, the Jews returned to the land. By 140 BCE, the Hasmoneans laid claim to the Temple and rebuilt Jewish life. But in 65 BCE, history would repeat itself. And by 70 CE, Roman legions entered the city and exiled the Jewish people from the land. Sovereignty lasted 73 years, and it would be another 2000 years before Jews would know sovereignty again in 1948.

Perched as we are on the 75th anniversary of this third commonwealth, we are at a juncture. Are we just marking time before the eighth decade comes and history repeats itself? Or are we compelled by the past to persist and prevail as a people despite history's constant threat against us? Like the biblical Amalek at our backside, we cannot spurn Golda's foreshadow about this land's promise to save our people. What would another 2000 years mean to our people, to God and Torah? This fragile perch but not insignificant truth, might cause you to say, "Lives within me our dearest hope."

That hope resides in all of us even if it's expressed in varied and individual ways. To be Israel means to wrestle, which derives from Jacob, who wrestled with God and prevailed. His name, Jacob, was changed to Israel, because he wrestled with God; in effect, he wrestled with eternity. We are Israel. We are wrestlers. We are always wrestling with Israel's eternity.

At the end of his book, Gordis cited Natan Alterman, who died in 1970, just before the Yom Kippur war. Alterman wrote:

The nation will grow numerous; there will come a time of peace when there is no more fear. But then, so that the nation never forget who it is, the last of its enemies will arise at the gate: from night our forefather will stand to battle against him until dawn. In this designated place will the two become intertwined until they become one half dust, half heaven.

Half dust, half heaven. It's who we must learn to be. All we can expect is that our efforts might permit us to stand firmly in the dust of the earth for many more than 80 years. They are moments of wholeness and completeness we call Shalom, peace, even if they are elusive. Then we will wrestle, again, with all our strength to win the struggle for our half of heaven we call Israel's eternity.

Now, I'll ask for the last time, What lives within you? Let me suggest:

Lives within you the Holocaust.

Lives within you Jewish self-determination.

Lives within you Israel's vision.

Lives within you Israel's hope.

This Yom Kippur,

lives within you and me

Israel's eternity.

Amen.