

TRADITION

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THE YOM KIPPUR WAR AFTER 50 YEARS

Yehuda Amital
Shlomo Fischer
Yehudah Mirsky
Haim Sabato
Jeffrey Saks
Tzvi Sinensky
Zachary Truboff
Wendy Zierler

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Contribution to the Study of
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Towards the Meaning of the Yom Kippur War

1.

It is natural for a Jew, who believes that all the events which impact the life of *Am Yisrael* are directed by Divine Providence, to explore the explanation and meaning of those events.

The Torah and the prophets command us, without pause, to reflect; and it is also a natural, intellectual demand placed on one who positions himself upon a foundation of belief. The Sages define a person who does not attempt to penetrate the true meaning of the events which he encounters, and in which he is involved, as one who is dead:

An evildoer is considered dead, even while alive, because he sees the sun rise and does not recite the blessing “Who creates light”; and he sees it set and does not recite the blessing “Who brings on the evening” (*Tanhuma, Ve-Zot ha-Berakha* 7).

On the other hand, it is clear that we lack the tools to know the “secrets of God” and to establish what the considerations, drivers, and intentions of Divine Providence were. However, this does not free us from our duty to delve [into these issues] and to reflect. “It is Torah and we need to learn it!”

Furthermore, sometimes a person, while viewing events through the perspective of faith, merits that the mist dissolves and things come into focus, and he reaches a sense of internal certainty; a certainty that cannot always be proved scientifically, but which does not detract from its validity. This is the power of faith, which is the birthright of those who serve God, believers, the children of believers.

This essay appeared in Hebrew in Yehuda Amital, Ha-Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim (Har Etzion, 1974), 11–32, based on an address delivered in Yeshivat Har Etzion on November 20, 1973, less than a month following cessation of the hostilities during the Yom Kippur War. The annotations were prepared by the essay's translator, Rabbi Ramon Widmonte, along with bracketed material inserted to aid understanding and context. We have also taken the opportunity to correct various mistakes in citation or other errors in the original, which appeared as the result of typographical errors in the original Hebrew edition. Our thanks to R. Widmonte, who studied under R. Amital zt"l at the Yeshiva, and to R. Reuven Ziegler for his assistance in bringing this about. TRADITION acknowledges with gratitude the permission of the Amital family to translate and publish this chapter.

2.

I have no intention to introduce new ideas, I will merely suggest an arrangement of concepts which we all know already.

The question which is asked at the moment, and I hear it whenever I meet with civilians and soldiers alike, is: What is the meaning of the Yom Kippur War?

This question is posed against the background of our definite faith that we are living in a period of the *at'halta di-ge'ula*, the first flourishing of redemption. Everything we have experienced until this point confirms and strengthens our certainty that we are indeed in the midst of the initial days of the redemption. And against the background of this belief, and against the background of the Six Day War, which taught us that war indeed has a real goal (which is conquest of the Land of Israel), this question splits into two:

1. What was the Divine purpose of the [Yom Kippur] War?¹ The Land of Israel was already in our possession after the Six Day War, so what was the purpose of this war?
2. A more searing question: Was there not a retreat in some sense, God forbid, in the Yom Kippur War? Did the outbreak of the war itself (with all its distressing phenomena)² not raise the possibility that there is, as it were, a withdrawal in the Godly process of the bringing of redemption?

1 As per R. Amital's statement of the background to this fundamental question, which was the Six Day War, he is posing a spiritual, not a practical question—given that from the founding of the State of Israel until the Six Day War, there had been a mounting sense of growth, strength, and expansion, to the point that it had become clear that the wars during that initial period, as painful as they were, had a real purpose—to conquer the whole land: What then was God's larger, divine aim in allowing the Yom Kippur War to occur? That war did not add any land to that acquired in 1967. In a quest to understand the spiritual meaning of the Yom Kippur War, R. Amital's analysis seems to be unique. After the war's initial trauma, R. Amital traveled to visit the students of his yeshiva around the country, to strengthen them and teach. We should note that the number of students in Yeshivat Har Etzion who lost their lives in the Yom Kippur War was significant, and this impacted R. Amital profoundly as was apparent from his essays and speeches from then on. The book this essay appeared in is dedicated to the memory of the eight Har Etzion students who lost their lives in the war: Avner Yonah, Amaziah Ilani, Asher Yaron, Binyamin Gal, Daniel Orlick, Moshe Tal, Raphael Neuman, and Sarel Birnbaum *zt"l*. It is crucial to contextualize how much the war and the loss of these students (and others who fell later) impacted R. Amital. On this, see Yehudah Mirsky's contribution in this issue of *TRADITION*.

2 Presumably R. Amital is referring to the serious lapses in intelligence and readiness, such that the State of Israel was caught unawares in 1973.

Behind these questions another one hides, if it is possible to define it as a question (because one can only ask a question where it is possible to supply an answer, but perhaps it is a sort of question): What can we expect for the future, in the wake of the Yom Kippur War? This is a question which only those gifted with prophecy can answer definitively; we can only speak of a general approach.

Nevertheless, these are the questions that all of us ask, raised as we were with the faith that we are indeed in the midst of the time of redemption's first flowering.

3.

We must say this: All of the troubles and suffering which have occurred to the Jewish people in every generation and in every era, including the troubles and suffering of which the prophets spoke and which the Sages foresaw, including the sufferings of the birthpangs of the Messiah, in the wake of which a great rebirth will come—none of these sufferings are required to occur in the larger scheme of things.

A rebirth can occur without these travails, using the approach of “Before she begins birth pangs, she has already given birth; before the pain arrives, she has already delivered a boy” (Isaiah 66:7).³ If we merit it, we merit great things without the birth pangs of the Messiah; if we do not merit it, great things are brought about through suffering. As the holy *Or ha-Hayyim* writes:

If the redemption occurs through the agency of Israel's merit, it will be an event, wondrous in stature, and the redeemer of Israel will be revealed from heaven with a miracle and sign . . . but this is not the case if the redemption occurs because the designated time has arrived and Israel is unworthy of it—in such a case it will occur in a different manner, regarding which it is stated that the redeemer will come “humbled and riding upon a donkey”⁴ (*Or ha-Hayyim* to Numbers 25:17).

According to what is happening now, it is clear that we are in the stages of the redemption brought about through suffering; however, the possibility that the redemption could come in another way draws us into

3 *Pesikta Zutrata, Shir ha-Shirim* 6:12. R. Amital is referring to two different approaches as to how the final redemption could occur—one which is easy and painless; the other which is fraught with difficulty. See *Sanhedrin* 98a, “If they are meritorious, the Messiah arrives with the clouds of heaven; if not, he arrives humbled and riding upon a donkey.”

4 In the original text of the *Or ha-Hayyim*, the citation is given for this verse: Zechariah 9:9.

an halakhic obligation—a positive mitzva that is a function of our present time. That is, the obligation of crying out, described by Rambam as:

It is a positive Torah commandment to cry out and to sound trumpets in the event of any trouble which comes upon the community, as it states: “[When you go out to war . . . against] an enemy who troubles you; you must sound the trumpets” (Numbers 10:9).

This is the classic case, “An enemy who troubles you!”

This means [continues Rambam], you must cry out [to Hashem] and sound [the trumpets] for whatever causes you trouble, for example, famine, plague, locusts and the like. This practice is one of the paths of repentance, for when a trouble comes, and the people cry out [to God] and sound the trumpets, everyone will know that they are suffering evil because of their wicked deeds, as it is written, “Your sins have turned away [the rains and your sins prevent the good from reaching you]” (Jeremiah 5:25). This [repentance] will cause [God] to remove the trouble from them. However, should [the people] fail to cry out [to God] and fail to sound the trumpets, and instead say, “This thing happened to us because it is the way of the world and this trouble is a chance occurrence,” this is a path of cruelty, which causes them to remain attached to their wicked deeds; and [due to their indifference] the trouble will add further troubles. This is what is written in the Torah, “If you remain indifferent to Me, I will be searingly indifferent” (Leviticus 26:27–28). As if to say, “When I bring a trouble upon you so that you shall repent, if you say that it is a chance occurrence, I will add to you a searing indifference” (*Hilkhot Ta’anivot* 1:1–3).

This fact—that the redemption could come without suffering, but that it is coming [currently] accompanied by suffering—obligates us in the positive mitzva of crying out to God, of introspection, of reflection on our deeds, and knowing that God expects us to repent.

4.

And here it is suitable to sound the alarm regarding one particular issue.

Sadly, for some time it has been noticeable that among religious Jewry, or at least within a significant portion of it, there is a sense that repentance is a positive obligation which *other people* are commanded to perform.

Wherever you turn, you hear, “The war broke out and caused what it did because of the sins of *Am Yisrael*—certainly because of the sins of *those*

Jews, those military figures, those political leaders, in all of whose words are expressed the arrogance of “it is my might and the strength of my hand [which has caused all my success!]” (Deuteronomy 8:17).

I have to say something about this matter. I believe that if God does have a claim against anyone, first and foremost, it is a claim against those Jews, believers, children of believers, who are immersed in the *beit midrash*. If He wishes to lay a claim against others then it is suitable to claim for far more serious things [than the arrogance expressed of “my might and the strength of my hand”]; and it is doubtful if it is possible to claim this against them: it is doubtful whether one could make such a claim against a person who never has God’s name on his lips. If there is a claim to be made, it is against us!

Now, as regards the claim itself: Firstly, the statement, “it is my might and the strength of my hand” was not made about weapons and not in connection with war. These words were said regarding possessions, houses, a life of ease:

Beware that after you eat and be satisfied, and build good houses and settle, and your cattle and sheep multiply, and you possess much gold and silver, and everything you have is in abundance; then your heart becomes arrogant and you forget the Lord your God Who took you out of Egypt from the house of slavery . . . and you say in your heart, “It is my might and the strength of my hand which has caused all my success!” (Deuteronomy 8:11–17).

This refers to the luxuries of a townhouse, a car, and all the other accessories of convenience.

Nevertheless, it is still permitted to say, “it is my might and the strength of my hand” as long as you “remember the Lord your God, because it is He Who gives you the power to succeed!” (v. 18). It is possible to say, “it is my might and the strength of my hand” while knowing from Whose hand you have that power. As R. Nissim of Gerona wrote in the fourteenth century:

The meaning [of this verse] is as follows. It is true that certain people have abilities in one area or another. Just as there are some people receptive to receive wisdom, others are receptive to devise strategies to collect and acquire wealth. And according to this, there is some truth in a wealthy person saying, “It is my might and the strength of my hand which has caused all my success!” [The verse here is actually saying,] “Seeing that this power is planted within you, be sure to remember Who it was who placed that power within you, and from whence it comes!”

This is what the Torah meant when it stated, “You must remember the Lord your God, because it is He Who gives you the power to succeed!” The verse does not say, “You must remember that the Lord your God gives you success”; if that were so, it would be rejecting the idea that the power planted within you is an intermediate reason for the collection of the wealth [and rather saying that God is the sole and immediate reason for that success]. But this is not how the verse was written, and therefore the Torah said that “Since your power is what generates this wealth,⁵ remember the Giver of that power, may He be blessed” (*Derashot ha-Ran* #10).

Similarly, regarding military might, the thought alone that “it is my might and the strength of my hand,” is not inherently flawed. Rather, what is flawed is the discontinuation of the thought regarding the *source* of the power which brought about the success [as was highlighted in the passage by Ran above]. And it is suitable to emphasize this point, because one often hears strident announcements (under the guise of declarations of faith) which include contempt for the power of arms, strategy, and the heroism of warriors. And this is what Ramban says concerning this (Deuteronomy 8:18):

It is known that Israel is mighty and successful at waging war, because they were compared to lions and a “tearing wolf” and Israel defeated the kings of Canaan. Therefore, God warned them: If you think that ‘It is my might and the strength of my hand which has caused all my success,’ you should remember God Who took you out of Egypt where you had no power or might at all. And you should remember further that in the desert, where you were powerless to survive, He provided all your needs. If so, this success you have achieved [in the Land of Israel] through your power, is also through Him, Who gave you the power which you used. And if you forget God, that power and your remnants will dwindle, and you will be lost, just like the Canaanites were—for anyone “who leaves Hashem, will fade away” (Isaiah 1:28).

It is clear that we have to fight against any phenomenon of feeling or emphasis of “it is my might and the strength of my hand” in all segments

5 The word “*hayyil*” can mean both “wealth” as well as more generally “success.” The whole question cited by R. Amital arises because the term can be read both ways. Generally, we have translated it as “success” unless it is clear by context that it should be “wealth,” as it is in this case.

[within the community]; however, this principle may not be allowed to weaken us or to bring us to seek paths which lead in alien directions.⁶

Secondly, we should reflect on the *midrashim* and declarations of the Sages. I explored how they explain military defeats (and there were many such [military failures in the past]) but I didn't find a single statement of *Hazal* that explained that a defeat was due to the thought that "it is my might and the strength of my hand." I did find other sins [given as reasons], and these are the words of the Sages in the *Tanhuma, Parashat Hukat* 4:

R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin said in the name of R. Levi, "In the times of [King] David, before children had tasted the taste of sin, they could explain the Torah in 49 perspectives of *tum'a* and 49 perspectives of *tahara*. And David would pray for them and would say, 'You, God, guard them! You will guard him forever from this generation' (Psalms 12:8).

The explanation of this verse is as follows: 'You, God, guard them,' means, 'Preserve their Torah within their hearts.' ['You will guard him forever from this generation' means] 'Guard him from this generation which is liable for destruction.'

And after all this praise, they would go out to war and fall because there were informers amongst them. This is what David said, 'My soul is among lions; I lie among those who are aflame; people whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue is a sharp sword' (Psalms 57:5). [The explanation of this verse is as follows.] 'My soul is among lions' – this refers to Abner and Amasa who were lions of Torah. 'I lie among those who are aflame' – this refers to Doeg and Ahithophel who were inflamed by slanderous gossip. 'People whose teeth are spears and arrows' – this refers to the people of Keilah, as it is said [by David when enquiring of God], 'Will the people of Keilah hand me over into Saul's hand?' (I Samuel 23:11). 'And their tongue is a sharp sword' – this refers to the Ziphites, as it is said, 'When the Ziphites came and said to Saul, "Is not David hiding with us?"' (Psalms 57:2).

6 R. Amital here outlines that utilizing military force is part and parcel of the Jewish tradition, even though it may eventually influence some people to misconstrue the source of military success as themselves. The Jewish approach is not to eschew the use of military force out of concern for this possibility, but rather to ensure that we teach that God is the source of our successes, including military victory. He seems to be hinting towards the approach taken within certain Jewish circles which argue against religious Jews serving in the IDF.

At that point, David said, ‘God, be exalted above the heavens; let Your glory be over all the earth’ (Psalms 57:6), meaning, ‘Remove your presence from amongst them!’⁷ However, in the generation of Ahab, everyone worshipped idols, but since they did not have informers amongst them, they would go out to war and be victorious. This is as Obadiah said to Elijah, ‘Has my master not been told what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of Hashem – I hid one-hundred of God’s prophets, fifty each in a cave, and I supplied them with bread and water’ (I Kings 18:13). [Rabbi Yehoshua explains this verse as follows.] Why did the verse specify both bread and water? Because water was more difficult to bring to them than bread. And Elijah announced on Mount Carmel, ‘I alone am left as a prophet of the Lord’ (I Kings 18:22), ‘and the whole nation knows, but they do not tell the king.’”

These are the foundations that can assist us in understanding these issues. If we seek sins [which serve as the cause of our wars and military losses], the Sages teach us that we should look for them in the realm of interpersonal behavior. They state in *Eliyahu Zuta* (7): “What was Jeroboam’s nature that he merited to restore Israel’s border? Wasn’t he an idolater? The answer is that he never accepted slander about Amos the prophet.”

We don’t know exactly which sins are the ones that [are responsible for the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War]; but we should seek them with *Hazal’s* perspective; and heaven forbid that we ignore those sins which they discussed.

What is demanded is our own repentance; not that of others. “Let us go and return to God, because He has torn and He will heal us; He has struck [us] and He will bind [us] up” (Hosea 6:1).

However, together with this, one needs to know that the purpose of suffering is not only punishment. Suffering is also cathartic and it educates. Suffering has educational goals that could be completely distant from the sins which caused the trouble. An educational goal elevates a person through the path of suffering by a process of inserting [into a person] an awareness and sensitivity in a particular realm or direction, a process which could be lengthy or short. Clearly, it all depends on us, and us alone.

7 This completes R. Yehoshua’s description of David’s generation—on the one hand with all the children being able to expound deeply on any principle of Torah, but on the other hand, with the generation so enamoured of slander and betrayal of their fellow Jews, that they lost their battles and David prayed to God to remove His presence from amongst them. R. Yehoshua next describes the generation of Ahab which was idolatrous, but its people won their wars because they did not betray their fellows.

5.

Another duty emerges from that first obligation of crying out to God—that of gratitude.

Rambam says that we cry out and sound the trumpets and fast, and when salvation arrives and the rains fall, we recite *Hallel* in praise and thanksgiving to God. Due to our many sins, at least on the home front, the awareness of our debt of gratitude is not felt as much as is required. We need to know that there was an exceptionally great salvation here, despite the tremendous sacrifices and pain. And we are obligated to give thanks. Had we known the extent of the salvation, we would sense its Messianic foundation, and we will address this further, later on.

What happened, happened, and we entered this war with no sense of existential danger. All were certain that the IDF would be victorious. Some said, “The IDF is strong!” Some added, “With the help of Hashem, the IDF is strong!” But there was no sense of peril, and because of this, the only ones who feel the magnitude of the salvation are those who sensed the great danger with their flesh.⁸

The Mishna states, “[You shall love Hashem] with all your might.’ This means, for every measure which He measures to you, you should thank Him tremendously” (*Berakhot* 9:5). And the halakha states:

If one’s father passes away, one makes the blessing, “The true judge.” If the father had money which he inherits: if he has no brothers, he also makes the blessing, “*Sheheheyanu*”; and if he has brothers, instead of “*Sheheheyanu*,” he makes the blessing, “One who is good and does good” (*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 223:2).

This is the halakha! Even when the pain is great. Even when many, many families are mourning, the pain does not erase the obligation of gratitude. The Sages state (*Yalkut Shimoni* 2:414):

“When I have brought upon you the good – give thanks; when I have brought upon you suffering – give thanks. And David also said this, ‘I will raise the cup of salvation; and I will call in Hashem’s name. When I find trouble and sorrow, I will call in Hashem’s name’” (*Yalkut Shimoni* 2:414).

8 Meaning, the soldiers themselves. R. Amital is noting that, as opposed to 1967, when the entire country was gripped with a sense of portending doom, people did not feel that way in 1973 on the eve of the war; therefore, a split emerged in the populace—only the soldiers who saw with their own eyes how close we came to utter destruction understood how great a salvation we experienced in 1973.

6.

This was an obligatory war, a *milhemet mitzva*, from two perspectives.

From the perspective of “aiding Israel from an enemy” (Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:1) the IDF is arrayed for war against an attacking army which wishes to annihilate us, “and it is a mitzva on all of Israel who are able to come in and go out [militarily] to help their brothers who are besieged and to save them from idolaters” (Rambam, *Hilkhot Shabbat* 2:23).

Similarly, a war for the sake of the Land of Israel, even without the danger of annihilation, is a *milhemet mitzva*. And it is considered a war for the sake of the Land of Israel even if the fighting takes place in Egypt, as Rambam rules (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:8) on the basis of the *Yerushalmi*, “It is permitted to return to Egypt for trade, business, and to conquer the land” (*Sanhedrin* 10:8). Indeed, there are two versions of the text in this case, the other being “to conquer other lands,” however the text in the *Yerushalmi* is “to conquer the land,” and it is on this there that Rambam bases his words.⁹

Any war in Israel is also a war for the unification of God’s Holy Name. The words of Rambam are well known, which I spoke about on Yom Kippur itself:

Once one enters the throes of battle, he should rely on the Hope of Israel and its Savior in times of trouble. He should know that he is waging war for the sake of the unification of God’s name and he should endanger himself and not fear or dread [death]. He should not think about his wife nor about his children; rather, he should wipe their memory from his heart, focusing solely on the war. And anyone who begins to think and ponder and frighten himself violates a prohibition, as it is written, “You shall not be afraid, and you shall not be alarmed, and you shall not be terrified because of them” (Deuteronomy 20:3), furthermore, [if he did frighten himself], he is responsible for the blood of all of Israel. If he did not overcome [his fear] and did not wage war with all his heart

9 Rav Amital writes here that there are two versions of the text—but it is unclear to which text he is referring. After consulting all the standard commentaries on Rambam, as well as the alternative versions of the Rambam cited in the Frankel edition, we were unable to find a text of the Rambam which had the alternative wording, “to conquer the land.” Many of the commentators here note that Rambam’s source is the *Yerushalmi* where the wording is “to conquer the land.” See the commentary of the *Yad Peshuta*, ad loc. R. Amital’s meaning seems to be that the *Yerushalmi* is the original text and that Rambam’s reading of the *Yerushalmi* is the alternative version, which seems to be at odds with the original source. But note, Rambam cites the *Yerushalmi* as we have it in *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Negative Commandments #46.

and soul, it is considered as if he shed the blood of everyone, as it states, “He should not cause the heart of his brothers to melt, as his heart” (v. 8). It is explicitly stated in the prophetic tradition, “Cursed be he who performs God’s work deceitfully, and cursed be he who withholds his sword from blood” (Jeremiah 40:8).

And anyone who fights with all his heart, without fear, with the intention of sanctifying Hashem’s name alone, can be assured that he will find no harm, nor will evil reach him, and he will build a sturdy home in Israel and he will earn merit for himself and his children forever, and he will merit life in the world to come (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 7:16).

There is a unique mitzva—to know that one is waging war for the sake of the unification of God; but that knowledge does not change the nature of the war, which is waged for the sake of His unification, whether the one taking part in it is aware of this or is unaware of it.

Israel, *by virtue of its very existence*, represents the Godly idea of His unity and His ways of *tzedaka* and justice. The meaning of a victory by Israel is a victory of the Godly idea; and so too the opposite, God forbid.

“You are my witnesses, says Hashem, and I am God” (Isaiah 43:10). Only the Sages could express it in so searing a fashion, “House of Israel – when you are my witnesses, then I am God; but when you are not my witnesses, as it were, I am not God” (*Yalkut Shimoni* 2:455). They also say, “[God is] just and saved’ (Zechariah 9:9), [and the midrash notes that] the verse should have said, ‘[God is] just and saves’ and it also states there, “R. Abahu said, ‘The redemption is yours and ours . . . and it is written, ‘I will show him God’s salvation (Psalms 50:23).’ The verse did not say ‘Israel’s salvation,’ but rather, ‘God’s salvation’” (*Yalkut Shimoni* 2:577).¹⁰

A war waged by non-Jews against Israel is a war against God Himself, and since they cannot fight directly against Him, they fight against Israel. “Those who say, ‘We have the upper hand; God did not make all this happen!’ (Deuteronomy 32:27). If they were able to tunnel under the heavens and ascend upwards, they would do so!” (*Shoher Tov* 74).

Further, a war waged against the Land of Israel is a war against Jerusalem. I once told the story (which has now been confirmed by that

10 R. Amital has conflated two sections of *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:577. The second part cited here (“R. Abahu . . .”) appears in the original before the first section cited here “when you are my witnesses . . .” The implication is that it is not only Israel being saved, but Hashem with them, as it were. Thus Israel’s salvation is also Hashem’s—when Israel is fighting a battle, it is also fighting on behalf of Hashem.

adversary, Hassanein Heikal)¹¹ that one of our important diplomats visited the ruler of Egypt six years ago and afterwards returned to Jerusalem and told the mayor, “You should know that the main problem for the Arabs is Jerusalem; not the Suez Canal, not Sinai, not Sharm El Sheikh, only Jerusalem!” The mayor said, “I’m astonished! Even for him? Even for Egypt?” The diplomat said to him, “Yes – only Jerusalem is the problem, even for the Egyptians.”

Only a war against Judaism and Jerusalem could unify all the Arab countries, which until only yesterday, were trying to swallow each other up. And, therefore, the bright minds of political Zionism never saw this coming. They never took into account that the establishment of the State of Israel would entail war with all Arab countries. No Jewish or non-Jewish politician ever entertained the thought that the Arab countries would all unite for the sake of such a small piece of land. But they all forgot that the Arabs’ war is against Jerusalem; and against Jerusalem, there is jihad. This finds exalted expression in the fact that the war broke out on Yom Kippur—this holy and exalted day—because this war is against Judaism, a war against God; and there is no day that expresses Israel’s uniqueness, our connection to our Father in Heaven, more than Yom Kippur.

Additionally, wars of non-Jews against us are primarily against the “fine” Jews, the Yom Kippur Jews. As Rambam writes:

Because the Creator has set us aside through His commandments and statutes, and because our pre-eminence is manifested in His general rules and ordinances (as it is said [Deuteronomy 4:8], “And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?”), all the idolaters envied us with a great envy, and their kings were pressured by this to arouse resentment and hatred against us. And their desire is actually to make war against God and to argue with Him—“but He is God, and who can argue with Him?” (*Iggeret Teiman*).

[As it states:] “‘I am blackened, but beautiful’ (Song of Songs 1:5). This means, I am blackened all the days of the year, but I am beautiful on Yom Kippur” (*Yalkut, Shir ha-Shirim* 982).

11 Mohamed Hassanein Heikal (1923–2016) was one of the most influential Arab journalists of his day, serving as the editor of the Egyptian *Al-Ahram* newspaper from 1957–1974. He was a hard-line opponent of Israel and also opposed the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.

7.

These ideas are valid, clearly, for all wars. When one speaks of war, one should view things with a biblical eye; and one should view this war in a Messianic perspective.

The essence of the phenomenon of war is itself biblical. For the two thousand years of our exile, we did not know war.¹² We knew many terrible persecutions; but we did not know war. There was huge excitement due to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising; but the ghetto uprising was a war of despair. The 1948 War of Independence, on the other hand, was a war of the type described by the verse, “Five of you will chase one hundred” (Leviticus 26:8), on which Ramban comments: “That He will give them the courage of heart and might that five will pursue one hundred.”

In the exile, there is no war—the reality of the exile is “I shall bring fear into their heart” (Leviticus 26:36)—a rustling leaf will frighten them.

In any war, one should always see the biblical aspects—the Bible is replete with wars, but since we did not engage in war in the exile, we paid no attention to this aspect. Moses spoke to all the tribes in his last days about waging wars victoriously: “Let Reuben live and not die . . . And this is for Judah . . . God has heard the voice of Judah . . . and He will be a help from his enemies” (Deuteronomy 33:6–7). He spoke about Torah, “They will teach Your ordinances to Jacob and Your Torah to Israel” (v. 10), and immediately thereafter, “God should bless His army and You should favorably accept its actions; God! Strike the loins of those who rise up against Him and His enemies, so that they will not recover” (v. 11).

The faithful shepherd Moses’ final words were: “Praiseworthy are you, O Israel, who is like you? A nation saved by God, Who is your helping shield, your majestic sword. Your enemies will lie to you, but you will

12 This is an idea strongly articulated in the thought of Rav Kook, who viewed the exile as a severing of the Jewish people from physical and natural expressions of strength; with the nation existing on a more ethereal, spiritual plane only. R. Kook felt that with the return to *Eretz Yisrael* the Jewish people could tap into the wellsprings of physicality in a spiritually healthy manner. It is important to note that R. Amital built his initial spiritual map upon the teachings of R. Kook. After the Yom Kippur we witness a significant divergence between R. Amital’s thinking on many of these matters and that of other followers of Rav Kook within the Religious Zionist world. This divergence was partly a result of the different ways that R. Amital read R. Kook, and this became particularly evident after the withdrawal from Gush Katif in 2005. See, for example, his essay, “What Kind of Redemption Does Israel Represent?” at: www.etzion.org.il/en/holidays/yom-haatzmaut/what-kind-redemption-does-israel-represent. In the remainder of this section of the essay, R. Amital notes that in the exile we lost access to much of the original context and meaning of the Bible—such as the military battles fought by David, for example, which were interpreted allegorically. With our return to the Land such passages again resonate with their original tones.

tread upon their heights” (v. 29). The Psalms receive a meaning which is not new to them; they receive anew their original meaning—because David, King of Israel, waged war!

It is forbidden to view this war as we viewed the persecutions in the days of the exile. We must see the greatness of the hour, in the biblical context, and it can be understood only in its Messianic dimension. If, after two thousand years of exile, we return and breathe the biblical air of *Eretz Yisrael*, it can only be through a Messianic light.

One of the *Roshei Yeshiva* told me that in the wake of the war, he had to inform a certain family that their son had fallen in battle. After about half an hour, the bereaved father said, “I survived the *Sho’ah*; in it, I lost a wife and five children who did not even merit a Jewish burial. My son now merited to be born in the Land of Israel, to live in it, to learn in it, to give his life on its behalf, and to be buried with a Jewish burial. Despite everything, there is some progress.”

A person is not judged for his actions in his time of anguish. I would not say it is only “some progress”; indeed, I testify that in my youth, when we were caught in the thick of the *Sho’ah*, our sweetest dream was that if it was decreed upon us to [one day] be killed, that at least we should fall in a war for the Land of Israel.

8.

There are three reasons to view the Yom Kippur War through a Messianic perspective:

First, the war broke out against the background of the establishment of Jewish sovereignty. “When God reigns, the nations tremble” (Psalms 99:1)— when Israel is redeemed, when Israel begins to establish sovereignty, the nations of the world are angered. When Israel is in exile—the nations of the world are tranquil, they are not agitated. The Sages report that this is what God responds to them:

So many empires ruled from amongst you and my children did not complain! . . . And now you are angry? I will also become angered and will not be placated, as the verse says, “When God reigns, the nations tremble” (*Yalkut Shimoni* 2:852).

And, additionally, in the *Sifre* (*Ha’azinu* 333, s.v. “*harninu*”) it states that in the future the same phenomenon which occurred with the Exodus from Egypt will recur, “the nations heard and were angered” (Exodus 15:14), because the nations sense their downfall approaching—“And I will remove the spirit of impurity from the land” (Zechariah 13:2). These are their death throes; this is the focus of the war. The nations are fighting over the essence of their existence as nations, as agents of impurity. Evil is

fighting the battle for its own existence—it knows that that after the wars of the Lord, there will be no place for the Satan or for the spirit of impurity. This war, which arose on the backdrop of the establishment of Israel's sovereignty is therefore lent a Messianic aspect.

Second, the participation of all the nations of the world in this war also points to the Messianic aspect of these events. Not only did so many Arab countries participate in the war, but all the world's nations became involved, "superpowers," "sub-powers," and even small countries—because all are consumers of the region's oil.

[We can apply the following verse to this war:] "Nations have stirred, kingdoms have tottered!" (Psalms 46:7). [We are witness to] the far-reaching changes which are being created and will be created because of this war: the whole political structure is crumbling; the technological changes which will be formed due to the search for replacements for fuel; the idol of Western Culture—technology—is struggling for its survival. And this is all due to the war. [We see] the cultural-moral collapse of the entire Western-Christian culture: the chatter about the brotherhood of nations, about international solidarity is revealed as empty and baseless; selfishness is revealed in all its glory.

Nothing can cover up the world's leading lights fawning before cultural and moral ephemera; nor their fawning before the dictators of countries in which slave regimes dominate, which are pervaded by a pre-medieval darkness. All these things belie the war's local and temporal aspect and, instead, ascribe to it its Messianic element, its revolutionary, historical perspective. "Nations have stirred, kingdoms have tottered; He let out His voice, the earth shall melt. The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress forever!" (Psalms 46:6–7).

Finally, the salvation in the war was tremendous, but at this point, only a few recognize it. In the history of Israel, there were very few wars like this—"many against the few."

[Before 1973,] we used to demonstrate that we are always fighting a "war of the many against the few" by comparing the number of citizens in the State of Israel to the number of citizens in all the Arab nations; however, on the war front, in any particular sector [in previous wars], the ratio of each side's soldiers against each other was never that [bad]. But this time, it was actually one Israeli tank against a hundred. There had never been a ratio of one to a hundred before. And if you add to this the many weapons of the enemy and the miserable state in which we began the war (those failures which have been discussed and will be discussed); and after all this, we achieved what we achieved; if we consider those sectors in the North and South in which our forces were not arrayed at all, and nevertheless the enemy was stopped by them—this was unequivocally a Divine

decree. Had [our enemies] not been stopped, they would have continued to race on, and they would have burned and destroyed every place they came to. If we speak with soldiers and fighters, if we listen to the stories of senior commanders, stories which they told when their hearts were still open due to the shocks that came with the war (perhaps they will never repeat those stories), we would understand that the measure of salvation in this war contained elements of great miracles, which explains the Messianic aspect of the victory.

In all other periods we were not accustomed to such [miraculous, military salvations]: it is not the type of salvation we merited in the exile. Here we are discussing salvations of which the prophets prophesied, of which the Sages spoke. However, due to our many sins, this feeling has not penetrated people's hearts.

These three things—that the war arose on the backdrop of the re-establishment of the State of Israel, the universality of the war, and the aspects of the great salvation (and if we add to this, the fact that this war broke out on Yom Kippur)—give the Yom Kippur War its Messianic element.

9.

Let us return to the questions we asked at the beginning: the meaning of this war, with all its saddening phenomena, and the *at'halta di-ge'ula*, Israel's first flourishing of redemption.

Let us enquire: what is the purpose of wars in the period of redemption's arrival? Do they only arise before the establishment of Israel's sovereignty, or can they come even after its establishment? [Before the Yom Kippur War], we set aside these questions because we didn't want, and it was not easy, to speak about them. And if wars were expected even after the establishment of the State of Israel, the question arises: do wars at that stage come only for the sake of conquering the land, or might they have other purposes? We will attempt to clarify how this war can be framed within the processes of redemption.

At the outset we must preface our words by saying: we cannot know about whatever touches on the period of redemption and the period of the Messiah; and we do not pretend to know the details, as Rambam states:

No person will know how all of these things, and all that is similar to them, will happen, until they happen, because these things are obscured in the words of the Prophets. Even the Sages have no tradition about these things, except according to the determination of the verses. Therefore, there is a dispute among them regarding these matters.

In any event, neither the order of the occurrence of these events nor their details are foundational principles of our religion. A person should never occupy himself with the *aggadot* and *midrashim* concerning these and similar matters, nor should he set them as the main point, for they do not bring one to fear or love [of God]. So too, one should not calculate the appointed times for the arrival of the Messiah Rather, one should wait and believe in the general approach to the matter, as we explained (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2).

We ask about the connection between the *at'halta di-ge'ula* and wars. The Gemara states, "War is also the *at'halta di-ge'ula*" (*Megilla* 17b). Rambam supplies a sign to identify the Messiah [as follows]:

If a king arises from the house of David, who contemplates the Torah and engages in *mitzvot* like David his forefather, according to the Written and Oral Torah, and he compels all of Israel to follow the Torah and to repair its breaches and he fights the wars of the Lord – then there is the presumption that he is the Messiah (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4).

We see that [even] after the establishment of the Kingdom of the House of David, the king will have to fight the wars of the Lord. In the Midrash it is said, "Approach there and eat of the bread, and dip your bread in the vinegar." (*Ruth* 2:14). [The meaning of this is as follows:] "*Approach there* means come close to kingship; *Eat of the bread* – this is the bread of kingship; *Dip your bread in the vinegar* – this is suffering" (*Rut Rabba* 5:6). We are already eating the bread of kingship, but nevertheless, we still dip it in vinegar—in suffering. [In this regard, we should also enquire:] when will the apocalyptic war of Gog and Magog come? [The Prophet states:]

Son of man, set your face toward Gog, the land of Magog, the prince, the head of Meshech and Tuval, and prophesy concerning him . . . And I shall unbridle you, [Gog], and I shall put hooks into your jaws and bring you forth and all your army, horses and riders, all of them clothed in finery, a great assembly, with encompassing shield and buckler, all of them grasping swords For many days you will be remembered; and at the end of the years you will come to a land [whose inhabitants] returned from the sword, gathered from many peoples, upon the mountains of Israel, which had been continually laid waste, but it was liberated from the nations, and they all dwelt securely. . . . And you will say, "I shall ascend upon a land of open cities; I shall come upon the tranquil, who dwell securely; all of them living without a wall, and they have no bars or doors" (*Ezekiel* 38:2–11).

There is a period of dwelling securely, [and] there is a period of ingathering of the exiles. Let us recall the words of the Vilna Gaon that the war of Gog and Magog in our time splits into smaller wars, He cites the Midrash:

This can be compared to a king who vowed to throw a [large] stone onto his son. Later, he reconciled with his son [but] he said, "I cannot cancel my words!" What did he do? He broke the stone into [smaller] pieces and threw them onto his son (*Kol ha-Tor* 1:6, citing *Yalkut Shimoni*, Psalms 635).

The Gaon said that in the merit of prayers, and in the merit of our suffering, and in the merit of all that [that was wrong in the world] the great ones of Israel repaired, the war of Gog and Magog is fragmented [and parceled out in smaller pieces]. And all this relates to the period after which we have dwelt securely in the land.

In Zechariah it is said:

And it shall come to pass on that day that I will make Jerusalem a stone of burden for all peoples; all who bear it will be gashed, and all the nations of the earth will gather about it. . . . And it will come to pass on that day that I shall seek to destroy all the nations that come upon Jerusalem. And I shall pour out upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplications (12:3–11).

And after this:

And they will look to Me because of those who have been stabbed, and they will mourn over it as one mourns over an only son, and they will be in bitterness, as one is embittered over a firstborn son. On that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the Valley of Megiddon. And the land will mourn, family by family (Zechariah 12:10–12).

About this Radak comments:

Afterwards, God said that if it should happen that one of them would be stabbed in war, even an ordinary person amongst them, it will be greatly astonishing for them—how could such a thing happen? And they will consider this as the beginning of their downfall and subjugation before their enemies; as Joshua did when the people of Ai killed thirty-six men of Israel, he said, "Alas, God!" (Joshua 7:6), and he said, "What can I say after Israel has turned their necks before their enemies!" (v. 7). So too will their status be at that stage, if they will see that even one of them gets stabbed.

This is the phenomenon and the feeling of "family by family" mourning.

There are things which are difficult to grasp and even more difficult to digest. The announcement of “through your blood shall you live” (Ezekiel 16:6) is one of those things which God Himself, as it were, feels that Israel is unable to grasp. Is it true that “through your blood shall you live”? Is there no greater contradiction than that between blood and life? Does it really need to be this way? And God repeats His statement, a second time, “And I passed over you and I saw you downtrodden in your blood, and I said to you, ‘Through your blood shall you live.’ And I said to you, ‘Through your blood shall you live.’”

10.

After the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel, war will come, perhaps several wars, and the sources mention a cruel war. We do not know the details of these things. However, the Sages speak of it lasting forty-five days (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 2). We do not know the meaning of the details, but we know that it will be a temporary phenomenon only.

“The first redeemer will be like the final redeemer” (*Yalkut Shimoni* 2:518), and even regarding the first redeemer, the question was asked [by Moses], “Why have You harmed this nation?” (Exodus 5:22).

“The voice of my beloved, he comes! He springs over the mountains and jumps over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle” (Song of Songs 2:8–9), “just as a gazelle appears and disappears . . . so too will the final redeemer appear and disappear from them. [How long did he disappear for? R. Tanhuma said, ‘Three months’ . . . So too will the final redeemer appear to them and disappear from them. And how long will he disappear for? Forty-five days]” (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba, Seder* 2, 1 [9]:3).

There are times of revelation and there are times of concealment. Because of the folds in the landscape, we don’t see the gazelle, but he is still running. This is what we have received in a tradition from the Gaon: In Israel, there is no going backwards in the process of the return to Zion; from every trouble will come a salvation.

And we should know that the war over Jerusalem, of which our prophets spoke, can happen at the Suez Canal and also in Moscow. In a modern war, one doesn’t fight in the city, one fights from a great distance—just like the United States fights its war here or in Vietnam. “And the city was captured” (Zechariah 14:2) – this could possibly mean the capturing of the Suez Canal front or the Nafah Base in the Golan Heights. Because, from a certain perspective, when the enemy held the Golan Heights and the Suez Canal there was fear: indeed, the way to Jerusalem was open!

11.

Let us ask: Why did this war come about? What was there left to conquer? For what purpose does the war of Gog and Magog arise? To what end do they bring unknown countries from far in the north to conquer the Land of Israel? After the establishment of Israel's sovereignty war can only have one meaning: the refining and purifying of the Jewish people; to shock us in order to refine the nation. And indeed, the nation is currently experiencing a huge shock.

We're not referring to those hundreds and thousands, may they live long, who stood before the gates of death and witnessed miracles, and began to pray and to put on *tefillin*. Certainly, all these add up, they certainly have a great place in the heavenly [plan]. For certain, these [happenings] play a role in the development of the nation, even if these phenomena are only temporary.

But what we are referring to are processes; internal processes of directions of thought and feeling, of which we currently only see the tip of the iceberg: the process described in Hosea, "And she will pursue her lovers and not overtake them, and she shall seek them and not find them; and she shall say, 'I will go and return to my first Husband, for it was better for me than now'" (2:9). This is a long process. When all the world becomes a stranger, when "she will pursue her lovers and not overtake them," then the search for an essential identity will come about. What, in essence, is our strength? We stand against the entire world! Then a gathering to our essence will come about: What gives us the hope and trust that Israel will continue to exist? This will entail the search and an inward turning; a search for the reason for Jewish suffering, to understand the meaning of these wars and our destiny. And from this will flow an identification with the Jewish nation in a search for the Jewish uniqueness; a process of recognition of the difference between Israel and the nations will come about. This is the first condition for any spiritual upliftment.

It seems to me that in this war I merited to understand the approach of Ramban, in his *Torat ha-Adam* – that we do not eulogize those executed by a [non-Jewish] kingdom. The Talmud tells us that the Sages wished to eulogize R. Yehuda ben Bava, "Where is the righteous one? Where is the humble one? The student of Hillel!" However, "the circumstances did not allow for this, because one does not eulogize those executed by a [non-Jewish] kingdom" (Sanhedrin 11a). Rashi and all the *Rishonim* explain that we do not eulogize them because of our fear of the kingdom; that the kingdom will hear that we are eulogizing those whom it executed, and will then increase its persecutions of the Jews.

Therefore, a eulogy over those executed by a [non-Jewish] kingdom depends on the circumstances—if there is fear [of the kingdom’s reaction], or not. Ramban rules that one does not eulogize [those executed in this fashion]. Beit Yosef (Y.D. 345:6) challenges his position: Why should we not eulogize them because they were killed by the kingdom? The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 47a–b) states that even an evil person who is executed for his wickedness is considered a *hasid*: “if one died unnaturally, it is an atonement for him . . . therefore, those executed by a [non-Jewish] kingdom gain atonement, since they are not executed by the law.”

However, when I had to eulogize one friend, then another, and then another, may God avenge their blood, I felt doubts: We are moving from the pain of an individual to the pain of the community, so how can I come to eulogize one individual amongst the collective of all those who have fallen, all of whom merited the highest levels (and no one can compare to them)—and I should speak of *one* person? It seems to me that here I understood Ramban’s approach—how is it possible to say “Where is the righteous one? Where is the humble one?” when together with him were killed so many, all of whom were righteous and humble? Even so, the halakha does not follow Ramban, and my mind settled.

Perhaps there is a special point to eulogize individuals in order to deepen our awareness that there is no numerical issue here. We do not speak of numbers, we speak of worlds—about each person who was a world on his own; and in order to increase the awareness of: “What is the difference between my son to that of my father-in-law”?¹³ What is the difference between Israel and the nations? How does Israel relate to the life of an individual? How do we care for our captives? And as opposed to this, how our enemies speak of “millions of sacrifices”?

There is a virtue in eulogizing an individual; because the war requires of us to repair the damage done to the value we must place on each and every individual, and there is a difference between Israel and the nations, like the difference between light and dark. The Sages taught, “Like a rose amongst the thorns (Song of Songs 2:2) – every thorn which pierces the rose increases its bouquet.” Suffering reveals the essence of the Jewish people—and this is the simple meaning, and the deeper meaning of “through your blood you shall live . . . through your blood shall you live.”

13 *Berakhot* 7b discusses the difference between Esau, who in his fit of jealousy, threatened to kill his brother, Jacob; as opposed to Reuben, who though displaced by his brother, Joseph, tried to save his life. In the Gemara’s depiction, Leah, our foremother, is comparing the son of her father-in-law (Esau son of Isaac) to her son (Reuben), and praising the latter for his compassion.

12.

In this period, we need great faith, great trust, and strong nerves. We can learn how far-reaching these things are from King Saul. After Samuel anointed Saul as king, he commanded him:

And you will come down before me to Gilgal, and behold, I shall go down to you to offer up burnt offerings, and to slaughter peace-offerings. You must wait for seven days, until I come to you, and I will let you know what you will do (1 Samuel 10:8).

King Saul was caught in a situation far worse than ours on the eve of the Yom Kippur War.

And with Saul were two thousand in Mikhmash and in the mountain of Bethel, and one thousand were with Jonathan in Givah of Benjamin; and he sent the rest of the people, every man to his tent (1 Samuel 13:2).

Seemingly, their weapons were sticks and stones, as is said there,

Now, no metal-smith was to be found in all the Land of Israel, for the Philistines said, "Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears." . . . And it was on the day of war, that neither sword nor spear was found in the possession of all the people who were with Saul and Jonathan, only Saul and Jonathan his son had them (vv. 19, 22).

Against them, the Philistines were arrayed "to wage war with Israel, [with] thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand riders, and people as numerous as the sand on the seashore" (v. 5). This is an endless number of infantry!

And the men of Israel saw that they were in trouble, for the people were hard-pressed, and the nation hid in the caves, and in the thickets, in the rocky crags, and in the towers, and in the pits. And some Hebrews crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilad, but Saul was still in Gilgal, and all the people hurried after him (vv. 6–7).

So Saul remained with six hundred men only (after the rest had fled) against thirty thousand chariots, six hundred cavalry riders and infantry like the sand of the sea. What else could Saul do? He could pray!

And Saul said, "Bring near to me the burnt offering and the peace offering." And he offered up the burnt offering. [And it was, when he finished offering up the burnt offering, that behold, Samuel came, and Saul went out toward him to greet him.] And Samuel

said, “What have you done?” And Saul said, “For I saw that the people had scattered from me, and you did not come at the appointed time of the days, and the Philistines are gathered in Mikhmash. And I said [to myself], ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me to Gilgal, and I have not yet made supplication before Hashem.’ And I held back! [And then I brought up the burnt offering]” (vv. 9–12).

“*Gevalt!* I haven’t *davened* yet!”

“And I held back!” – The Targum translates this as “I strengthened myself.” And only after that, “I brought up the burnt offering.” For seven days, he held on with all his spiritual capacity, with six hundred men, armed with sticks and stones; and at the last moment, he lost his nerve and he prayed! But this was a *tefilla* from despair.

“[Only after waiting for you,] I offered up the burnt offering.” And Samuel said to Saul, “You have done foolishly; you have not observed the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you. God would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now, your kingdom will not continue; He has sought for Himself a man after His heart, and God has appointed him to be a ruler over His people, for you have not done what Hashem commanded you” (I Samuel 13:12–14).

The ability to stand firm, with such strong nerves, is what is demanded from leaders. One has to strengthen oneself with faith and trust, as is stated at the end of the Song of *Ha’azinu*:¹⁴

For I raise up My hand to heaven, and say, “As I live forever.” When I sharpen the blade of My sword, and My hand grasps judgment, I will bring vengeance upon My adversaries and repay those who hate Me. I will intoxicate My arrows with blood, and My sword will consume flesh, from the blood of the slain and the captives, from the first breach of the enemy (Deuteronomy 32:40–42).

The *Sifre* says, “Because of what they did to the captives from my nation” (*Ha’azinu* 27).

14 In these verses we are warned that our enemies will harm our captured soldiers, and that withstanding the terrible psychological pressure this exerts, will demand faith, trust, and nerves of steel. In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War it became apparent that more than 80 Israeli soldiers, who had been taken captive, were subsequently killed by the Egyptians and Syrians—many Israelis had seen photos of their live, captured relatives, broadcast by the Syrians and Egyptians, but those relatives never returned from captivity. This was a cause of terrible anxiety for many Israelis. See the IDF documentation at: <https://tinyurl.com/mr5fxcpx3>.

Sing praise, you nations, for His people! For He will avenge the blood of His servants, inflict revenge upon His adversaries, and appease His land and His people (Deuteronomy 32:43).

13.

We are commanded to live with the faith that there will be no retreat since the beginning of the return to Zion. There are temporary concealments, but no retreat. All the paths—those paved and unpaved—lead us to the redemption of Israel. [As we learn in *Kol ha-Tor*, reporting the teachings of the Vilna Gaon:]

[In practice, there are seven ways for the *at'halta di-ge'ula* to occur, with the help of Heaven. The first way is: birth-pangs and pleasantness.] We must know from the beginning that the redemption will come by way of birth-pangs and pleasantness, as hinted at in the verse “birth-pangs for Joseph” ([A wordplay on] Ezekiel 47:13). It will come with the attribute of Divine Justice through an awakening from below. The “Footsteps of the Messiah” come with birth-pangs, and sometimes even indirectly. On the other hand, in contrast, the attribute of Divine Loving-kindness is present, from the perspective of “[Israel] stretched out his right hand [...] and placed it on Ephraim’s head” Genesis 48:14). We must know from the beginning, that during the period of the “Footsteps of the Messiah,” from every trouble, redemption emerges; and redemption will emerge from the trouble, as it states in the verse, “it is a time of trouble for Jacob; but out of it he will be saved” (Jeremiah 30:7). The Gaon, in his commentary on Habakkuk, regarding the verse, “I will rest on the day of distress” (3:16), states that this sentence refers to the Messiah son of Joseph, and that we should know beforehand that the Land of Israel is obtained through suffering. But through suffering, the land is actually obtained. The “Footsteps of the Messiah” come with disturbances and obstacles brought on by the Governing Angel of Esau as well as by Armilus, the Governing Angel of the Mixed Multitude. Finally, however, the Angel of Esau will fall into the hands of the Angel of Joseph, as is found in the *Midrash Tanhuma (Ki Tetze 10)*, [and this will occur] with the help of Messiah son of David, as happened when Judah saved Joseph: “out of the strong came forth sweetness” (Judges 14:14) and “He will accept the work of our hands” (Deuteronomy 33:11). Therefore, heaven forbid that we retreat when there is some difficulty, God forbid; or when there is an obstacle in the way of our service. We must

trust that out of that [obstacle], Jacob will be saved, and from the straits we will reach the breadth of God (*Kol ha-Tor* 1:13).

“You are faithful, Lord, our God, and Your words are faithful, and not a single one of your words will return empty.” Not even *one* word of Yours!

For, just as the rain and the snow fall from the heavens, and it does not return there, unless it has watered the earth and fructified it and made it grow, and has given seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will be My word that comes out from My mouth: it will not return to Me empty, unless it has done what I desire and has achieved what I sent it to do (Isaiah 55:10–11).

One should live with this type of faith. And anyone who comes into contact with a Torah scholar should draw faith from the very encounter itself. Faith should shine from him, and it should shine into the soul of every person. We will end with the words of the prophet, “I have brought near My righteousness, it shall not go astray, and My salvation shall not delay, and I will give salvation in Zion, to Israel, My glory” (Isaiah 46:13).

— *Translated and annotated by Ramon Widmonte*

Faith, Responsibility, and Suffering: Rav Amital's Response to the Yom Kippur War

נחפשה דרכינו ונחקרה ונשובה עד ה'
(איכה ג, מ)

Since the 1973 war, Yom Kippur has come to signify more than forgiveness and mercy; it has become a day marked by confusion, hurt, pain, and death—"the day of God, great and terrible" (Malakhi 3:23). The war arrived like a hail of meteors. Half a century on, its smoke still hovers over us, the craters remain open just beneath our feet.

The military, political, and diplomatic events of the Yom Kippur War reshaped Israel forever. No less crucial are the still haunting efforts to come to terms with the physical, mental, spiritual suffering brought about by the failures the war set loose.

Eight students of Yeshivat Har Etzion—Asher Yaron, Amaziah Ilani, Avner Yonah, Binyamin Gal, Daniel Orlick, Moshe Tal, Raphael Neuman, and Sarel Birnbaum z"l—were killed in the war. Many others were wounded. As is well known, Rosh Yeshiva Rav Yehuda Amital threw himself into caring for his students, the living and the dead, and their families. As R. Aharon Lichtenstein would later put it: "He conveyed the sense of a man who, on the one hand, possessed the leadership ability to seize hold of the hard and tragic situation, as it were. On the other hand, the gentleness and sensitivity that bespeak and reflect the depth of identification with grief."¹

1 Aharon Lichtenstein, "Mish'an u-Mivtah le-Shakulim," in *Le-Ovdekha be-Emet: Li-Demuto u-le-Zikhro shel Ha-Rav Yehuda Amital*, edited by Reuven Ziegler and Reuven Gafni (Yeshivat Har Etzion & Maggid, 2011), 333. Other, powerful reminiscences of R. Amital's experiences in the war and its aftermath, and the ongoing relationships he forged both with bereaved families and with the IDF's officer corps, appear in the essays by Orit Avneri and Yedaya Ha-Cohen in the same volume.

English readers wishing to learn more about R. Amital can turn to the biography by Elyashiv Reichner, *By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital* (Koren, 2011). Those wishing to read more in English about his distinctive religious thought and educational philosophy now have at their disposal Yehuda Amital, *Jewish Values in a Changing World* (Ktav, 2005); Yehuda Amital, *Commitment and Complexity* (Ktav, 2008), and Yehuda Amital, *When God is Near: On the High Holidays* (Maggid, 2015).

To be at once a man of action and a man of sorrow takes a special kind of courage, and R. Amital's courage took many forms. Making theological, moral, and Jewish sense of the horror of the war, was one of them. Here, as elsewhere, his primary stance was, as the line of liturgy he so loved prods and encourages us, *le-ovdekha be-emet*, "to serve You with truth"—to stand inside the truths of trauma, shock and pain, the truths of hope, and of moral obligation, and never to look for short-cuts.

The elegantly translated and annotated essay, "Towards the Meaning of the Yom Kippur War," presented in this special issue of *TRADITION*, originated as a talk delivered by R. Amital in Har Etzion on 25 Heshvan 5734 (November 20, 1973), some three weeks into the ceasefires that ended the shooting war. In it, he works both to understand the war as a historical event, and as a call to *teshuva*, and frames each as something both old and new.

Re-reading the essay today, it seems situated along several trajectories: responses to the war in Israeli society and thought; the history of *Hilkhot Teshuva*; and the history of Religious Zionism, which is incomplete without R. Amital's own remarkable path as educator and thinker.

For Israeli society, the Yom Kippur War was an earthquake. In the political realm it inaugurated the torturous decline of the State's founding Labor Party elites and sparked the founding of Gush Emunim. The social and cultural spheres were similarly impacted.² Artists, writers, and thinkers began to dig more deeply not only into themselves and their experiences, but into Jewish texts and traditions in a new search for meaning. As powerfully put in Rachel Shapira's postwar poem *Hashkem Hashkem ba-Boker* ("Early, Early in the Morning"): "We promised ourselves to learn from the beginning / what meaning there is to good or evil, defiled or pure."³ All the more jarring for its coming so soon after the stunning Bible-like victories of 1967, the 1973 war was a summoning to deep introspection on the arrogance and pride that had come before so savage a fall.

While it may not seem surprising that in facing the war R. Amital turns in time-honored fashion to the theological and normative framework of *teshuva*, the way he does so is regularly arresting.

2 So much has been written on the war that one scarcely knows where or how to begin. One book deserving of wider recognition, not least for its expertly synthesizing the political, cultural, social and religious effects of the war, is Gershon Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967–1977* (Times Books, 2006).

3 Available at <https://benyehuda.org/read/14508>. Set to music by Sasha Argov it was indelibly performed by Chava Alberstein on her monumental 1975 album, *Kemo Tzemach Bar* ("Like a Wildflower"), itself a response to the war in many ways (https://youtu.be/_iOx1J-2DE8).

Teshuva as Active Contemplation

Given R. Amital's call for *heshbon ha-nefesh*, spiritual accounting, it is not surprising that Maimonides' teachings on repentance are central to his presentation, though his formulations are striking. He opens by considering *hitbonenut*, introspection, as both a natural tendency and a moral demand, even, or perhaps precisely, in the face of our ultimate ignorance and uncertainty. In his framing, the first demand of *teshuva* is to stop and think. The reader cannot help sensing that this formulation is not just an interpretation of Maimonides' but of R. Amital's own experience.

Throughout Jewish history, *heshbon ha-nefesh* was the obligatory pursuit of an individual; if it related to the communal sphere at all, then it was a disempowered community in exile. But R. Amital was ever attuned to the times in which he was living. What then would national *heshbon ha-nefesh* mean for the empowered State of Israel? And at the same time how, amid the steady reckoning with the new meaning of Jewish collectivity, are we to preserve the lone, singular individual in his or her responsibility and sorrow, standing before God? Rather than casting blame on others for their sins, he urges, first, looking inward, and says that it is incumbent precisely on Religious Zionism to lay aside the familiarly comforting thought that *teshuva* is for other people.

The requisite *teshuva* is for the failing of *kohi ve-otzem yadi*, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deuteronomy 8:17). Yet he does not deliver this message punitively. We can acknowledge our strength—but only so long as we acknowledge its divine source. While calling on his Religious Zionist community to introspect and change, he is here, as elsewhere, offering a subtle counterpoint to other camps: to the Haredi stance that Jews ought not to have state-level power at all, an untenable position after the Shoah, and to the secular Zionist leadership, whose wielding of that sovereignty was laced with hubris, resulting in horror and death.

The Meaning of Jewish Statehood

Indeed, central to his thinking is the meaning of Jewish statehood—not exactly the Messianic state for which we have been waiting and will continue to anticipate, but instead a polity to be understood in the seemingly humbler and challenging terms of *Kiddush Hashem*. Again and again throughout his life, R. Amital stressed the centrality of *Kiddush Hashem in extremis* as well as in daily life, and for the individual as well as the collective.

The Shoah was, for him, the ultimate *Hillul Hashem*; the Jewish State founded so soon after is potentially the source of *Kiddush Hashem* if we make it so.⁴

This was also deeply tied to his reading of Rav Kook's vast corpus, which offers readers so many points of entry and interpretation. R. Amital focused on R. Kook's ethical teachings, including his conception that the very idea of *Knesset Yisrael* is of a divinely-ordained collective meant to light humanity's moral way, such that the project of Jewish revival in *Eretz Yisrael* is above all meant to be spiritual and moral. At the same time, R. Amital's acute sensitivity to human suffering and sorrow was manifest in his steady, dogged commitment to complex and pragmatic negotiation with reality, in place of clean-cut dogma and ideology.⁵ The witnessing of *Kiddush Hashem* is itself tied deeply to his interpretation of the Yom Kippur War.

The war, he says, was *milhemet mitzva* to save Israel, and, as all Israel's *milhamot mitzva*, served to proclaim God's unity to the world. The Jewish State is obliged to be a *Kiddush Hashem*, as Rav Kook said it should be, and not God's revenge on the nations of the world.⁶ Only hatred of Judaism and desire for Jerusalem, he says, could so unite Arab states otherwise and always at each other's throats.

The suffering brought about by the war should not to be seen as of a piece with diasporic suffering. To the contrary, the war broke out precisely in response to Israel's sovereignty. The fact that it became a global event attests to its eschatological character, as does the miraculous

- 4 Rav Amital's views on the Holocaust are spread through his writings, and treated at length in Moshe Maya, *A World Built, Destroyed, and Rebuilt; Rabbi Yehudah Amital's Confrontation with the Holocaust* (Ktav/Urime, 2005). This writer has at times struggled to understand the respective places of *Hillul* and *Kiddush Hashem* in R. Amital's thinking on the Shoah, as to why so vast a martyrdom would not seem a vast sanctification. Perhaps he reached this conclusion because Jews were given no choice at all and were killed no matter who they were or what they did? The global complicity and disregard for Jewish suffering? The sheer extent of the Devil's reign in those years? Or perhaps, here too, he was, with characteristic honesty, trying to honor equally compelling understandings of a historical event that utterly defies understanding.
- 5 See R. Amital's essay, "On the Significance of Rav Kook's Teaching for Our Generation," in *The World of Rav Kook's Thought*, edited by Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg (Avi Chai, 1991), 423–435. For a general survey of this and other themes in R. Amital's thought, see Reuven Ziegler and Yehudah Mirsky, "Torah and Humanity in a Time of Rebirth: Rabbi Yehuda Amital as Educator and Thinker," in *Torah and Western Thought: Intellectual Portraits of Orthodoxy and Modernity*, edited by Meir Y. Soloveichik, Stuart W. Halpern, and Shlomo Zuckier (Maggid Books, 2016), 179–217.
- 6 This is, needless to say, in starkest contrast to the teachings of Meir Kahane, which have gained increasing traction in our day. See Adam Afterman and Gedaliah Afterman, "Meir Kahane and the Contemporary Jewish Theology of Revenge," *Soundings* 98:2 (2015), 192–217. In conversation with this writer R. Amital expressed his consternation that any *beit midrash* would "let this Kahane through the door."

nature of Israel's ultimate victory after the utter collapse of the war's first days. But, if so, what sort of eschatological vision is this? Characteristically, he suggests, this is not a summons to self-congratulation but a dark, necessary task of "redemption by way of suffering," *ge'ula be-yisurin*. This brings us full-circle to Maimonides and the idea of collective *heshbon ha-nefesh*. Because one can imagine something different, better than the present, there is an immediate obligation of "crying out" per the presentation in Maimonides' *Hilkhot Ta'anivot* which connects *tze'aka* directly to *teshuva*.

Public prayer and fasting is rooted in an acknowledgement of human vulnerability, grounded in an awareness of the moral stakes of human action in God's world, rousing the community to acts of compassion that aim to open sluices for God's compassion in the world.⁷ In R. Amital's view, what is the nature of this redemption by way of suffering? It is one that teaches "the purpose of suffering is not only punishment. Suffering is also cathartic and it educates. Suffering has educational goals that could be completely distant from the sins which caused the trouble. An educational goal elevates a person through the path of suffering by a process of inserting [into a person] an awareness and sensitivity in a particular realm or direction, a process which could be lengthy or short. Clearly, it all depends on us, and us alone."

This is not an easy absorption of suffering into immediate Messianic expectation. Again and again he cites Maimonides on the perils of calculating the end-time in anticipation of the arrival of Messiah, which fosters neither piety nor love of God. We must believe in redemption, even as we move without respite through the great unknowing that is human history, with all its paradoxes, above all with the knowledge of *be-damayikh hayyi*: the blood is real, and the life is real as well.

The concrete situation facing R. Amital in this discourse as an educator and pastor is bringing strength and solace. And all the while not to cut corners or let himself off easily (his well-known motto, "*ain patentim!*") to bring comfort and to lay hold of individual and communal responsibility. As he points out in his discussion herein of Nahmanides, there is a dialectic of weeping for an individual and for the many, and in the end one cannot forego either one. Indeed, part of the *tikkun* the war can bring about is the lone individual's value and worth—and knowledge that there is a profound difference between Israel and the nations.⁸

R. Amital is not the only figure to approach this issue; of course, the dialectic of individual and community is central to the thought of

7 These formulations arise from my reading of Jonathan Wyn Schofer's beautiful chapter, "Drought," in his *Confronting Vulnerability: The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 109–139.

8 One is reminded of R. Amital's comment that it was during his time in a Nazi labor camp that he recited "*she-lo asani goy*" with greater *kavvana* than he ever did before or since.

R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and needless to say, R. Kook as well.⁹ Yet the absence of reference in this discourse of R. Amital's to R. Kook's *Orot ha-Teshuva* is striking. The great Kabbalistic theosophy of that work is too sweeping, too inviting to take one's gaze off the dead and their loved ones and absorb them in the great cosmic motions of the Messiah. Also, *Orot ha-Teshuva* is concerned with the cosmic sweep of repentance, and individuals' working through our regrets for failings, frustrations, and alienation, with little discussion of historical suffering. Moreover, what that work addresses somewhat less straightforwardly is what R. Amital is centrally concerned with here: repentance from sins in the interpersonal realm.

Rav Amital's Own Trajectory

Throughout his life R. Amital evaded easy categorization, not least with regards to the fraught and deeply consequential issue of the State of Israel's place in the Messianic drama. It is worth remembering that while Zionism and Messianism were twinned from the beginning, the full-blown ideology that the State constituted *at'halta di-ge'ula* emerged later, taking on greater force after 1967. This was in no small part due to the popularity in those years of *Kol ha-Tor*, the work from which R. Amital quotes in his discussion of redemption by way of suffering.¹⁰ In historical perspective, it was the Yom Kippur War's brushing up against

9 Of course, the very eclecticism in the sources of R. Amital's teachings—R. Kook, Hungarian figures like R. Moshe Shmuel Glazner and Hatam Sofer, various Hasidic streams, alongside, one suspects, *Musar* teachings of the Slabodka school from which his father-in-law and grandfather-in-law emerged—reflects the non-dogmatic tenor of his thinking.

10 *Kol ha-Tor* presents itself as a collection of messianic teachings of the Gaon of Vilna, as transmitted to his disciple and distant relative, R. Hillel Rivlin of Shklov (1757–1838), who was part of the early nineteenth-century Lithuanian migration to *Eretz Yisrael*, known as *Aliyat Talmidei ha-Gra*. The work was first partially published by members of the Rivlin family in 1947 and in its entirety, from manuscript, in 1968 by the magisterial, fascinating scholar, R. Menachem Kasher, who included an essay of his own, entitled "*Ha-Tekufa ha-Gedola*." It has been the subject of intense scholarly debate ever since. The overwhelming consensus is that the work was at the very least not written by R. Hillel or in his lifetime, but later (and perhaps much later). At stake in this seemingly recondite debate are two important questions: What sort of full-fledged messianic doctrine did the Gaon of Vilna subscribe to and impart to his students, if indeed he had one at all? What exactly were the motivations and principles of *Aliyat Talmidei ha-Gra* and their descendants, especially the Rivlin and Salomon families, who were crucial to laying institutional foundations of the New Yishuv well before the advent of Zionism, and how are they to be understood in the sweep of Zionist history as a whole? A major article on the subject by the remarkable Yosef Avivi, "*Kol ha-Tor: Dor Ahar Dor*," *Mekhilta* 1 (December 2019), 159–336, also constitutes an anthology of a massive number of sources in general on the *aliya* of the Vilna Gaon's students from the early nineteenth century to the present. Readers seeking to learn more about this should seek out the works of Emanuel Etkes, Raphael Schuchat, and Arie Morgenstern.

near-apocalypse, so soon after the stupendous victories of 1967, that gave rise to Gush Emunim. In other words, the war led to the widespread operationalization of messianic thinking as a concrete political activist program. As Religious Zionism took on an increasingly messianic character, R. Amital's thinking on messianism, situated as always in his concrete work as an educator refusing easy answers, shifted, in multiple ways.

An independent-minded thinker who defied easy categorization, R. Amital's very public moves towards the leftward side of Israel's political spectrum over the years were not an about-face, but a revisiting and deepening of his abiding commitments and values. As Kalman Neuman put it, if in the early years R. Amital polemicized with those outside Religious Zionism who saw nothing redemptive here, as the years went by he polemicized within the Religious Zionist camp, for its constricting the meaning of Jewish statehood to *Eretz Yisrael*. He didn't lay out a messianic doctrine but conveyed his sense of events; he was motivated not by Messianism but concern for Jews' bodies and souls.

A number of things drove him to his later positions. One was his horror at war and the hope that if the cost of avoiding war was a ceding of some of *Eretz Yisrael* it was a cost very worth considering. Another was the mounting gap between vision and reality, and his sense that the aspiration of redemption itself was giving rise to irresponsible behavior, a narrowing of emphasis to territory without regard to ethics or *kevod ha-beriyot*.¹¹ Here as always *Kiddush Hashem* was central—hence his vehement response to the 1982 massacres at Sabra and Shatila, his recoil from the militarism of Ariel Sharon, alongside his demurral from messianic Religious Zionism's adopting a bulldozer mindset of its own, and from the dogged naïveté which Peace Now, for its part, displayed in its way.

His mix of pragmatism and *yirat shamayim* caused him to look lucidly at the programs of his day, and ask if they really reflected our best efforts at religious truth. As he said, “we are *Ge'ulei Hashem*, not *Ge'ulei Mashiah* or *Ge'ulei Eliyahu*.” He emphasized the extent to which R. Kook's ideas about the beginning of redemption centered on ethics and spirituality. More broadly, as he put it, true Messianism talks not only about faith but about Jewish suffering; not only about earthly politics, “Whole Land of Israel” (*Eretz Yisrael ha-Shelema*) and population transfer, but about spiritual *tekuma* and *teshuva*.¹² In certain respects, Rav Amital's messianic reading here in the immediate aftermath of the Yom Kippur War seems situated between those two periods outlined by Neuman.

11 See Neuman's afterword to *Be-Shuvekha le-Zion* (Yediot Sefarim, 2022), 409–410.

12 See for instance, *Be-Shuvekha le-Zion*, 103, from a talk delivered in 1992.

As in his first phase, in 1973 R. Amital was working to convey the sheer significance of the times in a redemptive frame to Haredi and secular interlocutors who reject that frame, each for their own reasons. As in his latter phase, he struggled to honor the sheer difficulty and complexity of events. But in the essay presented here, he is working to convey the redemptive frame to his immediate, so to speak familial, audience, communicating to them and to himself that their suffering is meaningful. And he is employing the straightforward language of redemption from which he came to later demur, but which he never entirely abandoned.

For both periods of his thought the Holocaust was crucial—its suffering is what made the creation of the State a stunning redemption. And its suffering is what made R. Amital say over and over that neither he nor anyone could ever truly claim to read God's mind. His concern first and foremost for suffering—and the potential to avoid further war—was no small part of his turning away from what had become the mainstream of Religious Zionist doctrine, under the aegis of R. Zvi Yehuda Kook and his disciples.

To him, not to seek the meaning of events is to abandon God's connection to the world, and our own God-given minds. At the same time, to presume we can know how all will turn out and on that basis to pursue courses of action leading to suffering is its own form of hubris and rebellion against God. In this we see an analogue to the words of a significant secular writer, public figure, and Holocaust survivor, Abba Kovner, with whom R. Amital maintained a friendship. Speaking at a memorial service for the Yom Kippur War in 1980, Kovner said "history is made not by *hakhamim* but by *ma'aminim* (not by the wise but by the faithful)." There is, he said, "but a footstep's worth of difference between faith and fanaticism, but it is on that one step that the Jewish people built all that they have built in the Land of Israel. The problem today," he said, "is that we are too much *hakhamim* to be *ma'aminim*."¹³

Throughout his life, R. Amital took up the twin challenges of wisdom and faith. He succeeded in neither relinquishing the probing of the mind nor the longing of the heart, to look honestly at oneself and the world from as broad a perspective as one can without ever losing sight of concrete human suffering. He continued as he had that day in 1973 in yeshiva comforting his students while recalling those who lost their lives in that war of Yom Kippur.

13 Abba Kovner, *Al ha-Gesher ha-Tzar: Massot be-al Peh* (Sifriyat Poalim, 1981), esp. 215–216.

A Concluding Reflection

Here, as elsewhere, one must resist the temptation to cast R. Amital as more systematic a thinker than he was. As Akiva Ernst Simon once said, there are two kind of theologians, those who think God has a system, and those who think He has truth.¹⁴ I would add that to think that God has a system that we humans can grasp is itself idolatrous folly; but that does not release us from the burdens and joys of thinking. In that deeper sense of *Talmud Torah ke-neged kulam* – our study and reflection on the holy things that have no measure is itself without measure, and cannot be any other way. The truths that we can discern as they emerge, as Buber understood, are those of encounters with God, others, and ourselves. And the truths to which R. Amital is driven in these pages emerge from his own searing encounters with the truths of his time, of his students' lives, and their deaths.

14 Akiva Ernst Simon, *Ye'adim, Tzematim, Netivim* (Sifriyat Poalim, 1985), 164–165. This comment appears in Simon's 1963 essay on Martin Buber; I think that it may apply as well to R. Kook, and certainly to R. Amital.

God Hidden in Heaven's Vaults

Twenty-five years had passed since the Yom Kippur War. That's when I met him. Two days after my book *Adjusting Sights* was published in 1999, I attended the wedding of an old student of mine. An energetic wedding band of eight musicians played with full force. The drummer pounded away mercilessly and, while doing so, would crash the cymbal and shake the maracas. Three trumpets blasted loudly. Circles of young people full of gaiety danced with youthful vigor, encircling the bride and groom, stomping their feet with all their might, waving their hands in the air and singing loudly. Older guests chatted at the tables about this and that, raising their voices, and repeating ever more loudly, trying to talk over the sound of the deafening drums. Young waiters, not much older than children, walked cautiously, with measured steps, squeezing between round tables and crowded guests, carrying full platters on one hand that were more than they could handle, struggling to steady themselves, to keep their balance, so that towering stacks of plates and dishes wouldn't topple over.

There, among the trays of colored soft drinks and guests tucking in to taste fish delicacies on toothpicks, that's where I met him. His face was covered in scars from severe burns. I barely recognized him. He approached me with great agitation, his body shaking, his eyes burning, and he stood in front of me gripping my shoulders in his two hands with severe force. At that moment it felt like pliers were cinching my body.

"You know!" he said. "I knew all along that you knew! Now tell me! Right now. You can't dodge me anymore."

"What am I dodging? What do you mean? What are you asking?" I quietly inquired, drawing out the words, trying to keep calm, trying to identify the speaker with certainty.

"Don't you know what I'm asking? You don't know . . . ? You wrote about it in your book! *You* wrote it. Last night I read all night long, time after time, finishing and going back to page one, reading and re-reading. You brought me back there, to the Golan Heights, the day after Yom Kippur at nine in the morning. The truth is, I'm always there, at the Nafah encampment. For 25 years I've been asking, day and night, without rest,

as I lie down and as I rise up, in the daytime and in my dreams, the quarry of Nafah goes with me. I'm looking for an answer—what happened there?”

His eyes looked into mine with a piercing gaze, as moments of heavy silence passed between us. A waiter slipped. A tower of glasses collapsed and shattered with a crash. *Mazel Tov* everyone called out, *Mazel Tov!*

The cymbals also crashed with a great thunderous noise, and he burst out with no preliminaries and no explanation, shaking my shoulders roughly: “Who is it that abandoned us in the tank when it went up in flames? Who? I read the book all night,” he said, “and I know you know. I beg you, tell me.” His accusing voice suddenly melted into a plea. I saw tears in his eyes. My eyes teared up as well.

“Please tell me what happened. You were in the tank next to us. You wrote the story. In your book you wrote it.”

What shall I tell him? I thought, I really don't know. What shall I say? Did I see his tank get hit? Did I write about *his* tank? Did I write this?

While he is speaking, another approaches. Montag falls on my neck, sobbing. “I read all night,” he says. “All night long. Someone remembered us.”

While he is speaking, yet another approaches—Rav Shagar, of blessed memory. “I read it,” he informs me immediately.

I looked at his face, trying to read his expression, the burns and scars were still clearly visible. I knew his tank fought next to mine in Nafah. It took a direct hit and caught fire. Our close friends from Yeshivat HaKotel, Shmuel Orlan and Yeshayahu Holtz, were in that tank. Together we learned in yeshiva, together we fought in the war. Shmuel was a gunner, Shaya was the loader. Shagar, the driver, dozed in his seat. He woke suddenly from the searing heat, saw a pillar of flame two stories high, and with his remaining strength and a hammer freed himself from the driver's compartment at the last moment, engulfed in flames. Our friend Yaakov saw him and saved him.

“You wrote the truth,” Shagar told me with quiet emotion, his voice hesitant, almost stuttering. “Whoever was there understands what you wrote and what you didn't write.” I looked at his face and understood very well. What else is he trying to say but does not? I did not press him. I knew a day would come and he would speak.

I knew Shagar from a young age when we studied at the Bnei Akiva Netiv Meir yeshiva high school under Rabbi Aryeh Bina. He was in the eleventh grade, and I was a young student in the ninth grade. Sariel Birnbaum sat to my right in the *beit midrash* in Bayit VaGan, his face as sweet as that of a child, and Shagar sat to my left, his face ever serious and full of pain. For a fleeting moment a smile would cross his lips, and disappear just as quickly. I was learning *Bava Kamma* with energy and speed,

glad to discover the beauty of independent study in a bustling and noisy *beit midrash*, and he sat beside me, tormented, pondering, thinking, and debating with his *havruta*. He went to retrieve books from the library, his hand pressed against his temple, meditating. Rabbi Bina passed between us, examining our faces, glanced at the Gemaras, and then looked us over again. This is how R. Aryeh reviewed his young students, assessing the strengths of each with but a glance.

Five more years had passed since my meeting with Shagar at that wedding; it was now 30 years since the Yom Kippur War. Shaya Holtz's brother-in-law called me: "We are having an evening about the war in memory of Shaya," he said, "and we wanted to invite you to come. Will you come?"

Will I come? Of course I'll come. How could I disagree? Our friends from HaKotel were there. Together we learned, together we fought in the war, together we guarded in our hearts the sorrow of silence, the thoughts, the faith, and the cries of grief. Everyone came, Shlomo and Yisrael and Zion, all who were there after Yom Kippur in the Golan Heights. We sat around the table, no one touched the refreshments, the air was heavy and tense. The moderator opened with general remarks. He had not been there in the war. He started by asking each of us a few questions.

My turn approached, and I felt anxious and agitated. I was silent as long as others spoke. I made no comments and did not participate in the back-and-forth. After all, who could understand what we went through? After some general questions, the moderator asked me: "What happened to your faith in the war?" I started to answer, the words flowed out as if talking to myself, again and again I went back to those hours. Who knows how many times I went back to them. Maybe every day, maybe every night. Moments when the tank commander shouts to me over the radio: "Fire! Fire! They're shooting at us! Sabato, *pray!*" And I exert all my strength and cry out: *Ana Hashem, hoshi'a na! Save now, I beseech thee, O Lord! Save now, I beseech thee, O Lord!* At that moment the secret of prayer was revealed to me, and the secret of faith that fills all the chambers of the heart. "As for me, it is good to draw near to God." That's when I understood our Sages' statement about the servant girl's vision while standing at the Red Sea. Roni the driver shouted to me after we jumped from the tank: "Haim, what do you feel?" And we both shouted: *I place the Lord before me always!*

When I wrote *Adjusting Sights* I debated whether to write what we had shouted. I didn't dare, so I didn't write it. I said, who will believe us? Now I have told it. I knew, *they* were there. They would believe it. But the moderator wouldn't let me be: "What of the pain, the fear, the burnt tanks around you, your good friends—what did it do to your faith?"

I answer him: Every moment my faith grew stronger. I can't explain to you why. Maybe because I saw with my own eyes what a person's life is, and I stood alone in front of my Creator. Perhaps from the power of a pure, simple prayer. Everything I learned all my life, everything I read and heard in yeshiva, concerned simple faith. These feelings of the heart burned in me to such an extent that I remember saying to myself then: I know the day will come when the heart will be numb. I know days will come when I will have forgotten everything. Such is the way of the world. New things sweep out the old, heartbreak gives way in the face of routine—and who knows what my faith will be then. Therefore, I said to myself during the war, I will write on a note what is inscribed in my heart. And every time I weaken in my faith, I will look at it and remember.

I always had a small notebook in my shirt pocket. It had become greased with machine gun oil, but it was most precious to me. In it I wrote poems. I remember one poem:

*In prayer shawls enfolded
With palm fronds in hand
Their shelter's imploded
No barriers withstand
Earthy refuge corroded
In heaven's shadow they stand.*

I tore a page from the notebook and wrote down my feelings and thoughts. And I also wrote there: "When the day comes and I forget, I will read this note." I placed the note on the periscope in front of me. That's where the gunners would tape what was truly valuable to them. Some fellows put their wives' photos, others put their little boys' letters. I put the notebook with this page there. *I placed it before my eyes always.*

A few days later, the tank was washed at the base encampment with high pressure hoses. The notebook was also washed out of the world.

I remembered a parable of the Hasidim: To what can this be compared? To those who were walking in the forest on a dark and gloomy night, and their way was lost in a stormy tempest, and they knew not where to turn. Suddenly lightning flashed. Many looked to the sky in awe of the lightning's beauty illuminating the fog; the lightning passed and they remained wrapped in the fog. But there were those who looked into the thicket of the forest to find the path forward by the illumination of the lightning bolt.

Rav Shagar rose to speak after me. There was a lot of tension in the air, and an oppressive silence. His face said it all. Struggle, sorrow, and distress.

"I listened to my friend's words carefully," said Shagar. "It is clear that he speaks the truth. That's how he felt. But I didn't feel that way. I've wanted to tell him this for a long time, since I read his book about the war. When I saw what happened to my dear friends and the tanks around me, I was beset with terror. It's terrifying to see a life cut short. Shaya and Shmuel, young men full of charm and grace, a grace of purity and uncommon spiritual beauty, sitting on the turret of the tank learning Gemara naturally and innocently. I understand this terror as the '*yir'a ila'a*,' the 'higher awe' written of in Hasidic books. It is frightening, because through it we encounter the mystery of eternity, the mystery of life. I also feel this terror towards life itself, the life that continues. I feel that I am living on borrowed time, I am living on grace for which, from a human perspective, I can find no explanation. And life is constantly accompanied by deep reproach: How do I live this life that is nothing but a free gift. I remember on Sukkot during the war I thought the *sukka* embodies trust in God, and yet it did not protect us. Apparently it does not in fact offer protection in this world, our visible reality, which is the reality with which we live here and now."

Shagar continued, "We are hiding in the shadows, the shadows of faith. God's providence, in which we all believe, was hidden in the shadows, not in the light. He is a Hidden God, we experienced Him through *hester panim*, His inscrutable obscurity. We are believers and 'I sat down under His shadow with great delight.' Faith is often found in hard questions, the sort that Rabbi Nahman of Breslov says there are no answers to. But David already said in Psalms: 'A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.' God is found inside a broken heart, the feeling of brokenness is itself a divine presence greater and higher than any other. The anguish, the injustice that one may feel in such a situation, perhaps even the sense of shame, actually brings a kind of faith, a deep faith in a hidden God."

We lowered our eyes. Zion looked at me with a questioning glance. Shlomo came up to me and put a hand on my shoulder. "Just like back then, remember?" he asked.

Certainly I remember. How could I not remember?

It was raining that Saturday night in Khan Arnabah, as Shlomo and I held an impromptu *Melava Malka*, sitting on a rock. We were two soldiers in NATO coats and knitted caps, sore and trembling from the cold and sadness, as we remembered Shmuel and Shaya. We sat in the shadow of the tank, with a quarter of a challah, half a tin of sardines, and a drop of wine. We recounted tales of the Hasidim, the disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov, and we spoke of the merits of the People of Israel. We recited from memory snippets of song about Elijah the Prophet, *may he be remembered for*

the good!, and we waited for the light of the moon, hidden behind heavy clouds, to shine for a moment so that we could bless it. Shlomo asked, “Do you remember that I sang for you that night the *piyyut*, *Be-Shafrir Hevion*, ‘O God Who Hides in Heaven’s Vaults,’ to the tune of the Rebbe of Klausenburg?”

Certainly I remember. How could I not remember?

This essay, translated by Jeffrey Saks, is adapted from Haim Sabato, *Be-Shafrir Hevion* (Aliyat HaGag-Maskil & Yediot Sefarim, 2014), chapter 15, and appears in English with permission of the author. The poem, “In prayer shawls enfolded,” was translated by Rhonna Weber Rogol; the vignette of the *Melava Malka* in Khan Arnabah, referenced here, is found in the final scene of *Adjusting Sights* (The Toby Press, 2003).

Point-Blank Prayer: On Haim Sabato's *Adjusting Sights*

And when halakhic man stands up and prays, "May it be Thy will . . . that Thou wilt replenish the deficiency of the moon and it will no longer be diminished" [in the prayer following the blessing over the new moon], he refers to the replenishing of the deficiency of the real cosmos which does not correspond to the ideal image of reality. Halakhic man's yearnings for the national redemption . . . draw upon his hidden longings for the full and complete realization of the ideal world in the very nub of concrete reality.¹

One is hard pressed to imagine the longings for national redemption crashing up against the "nub of concrete reality" in a more fraught way than for a young, idealistic, *hesdernik* returning weary from the battles of the Yom Kippur War. Israeli society, and the Religious Zionist community in its own particularistic way, felt the deficiencies and diminishment of the redemptive aspects of Zionism's promises following the traumatic and near calamitous conflict. Literature, in ways that rival and at times surpass history or philosophy, can often serve as the keenest prism to explore such themes. As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein observed, this is because "great writers are preeminent" among

[t]hose who have at least attained and revealed some measure of knowledge. . . . In reading them, we can confront the human spirit doubly, as creation and as creator. . . . [I]maginative artists have been more illuminating than theoreticians—not only because they have described more powerfully but because they have also probed more deeply. . . . [The author] melds precision and sensitivity, intuition and acuity, to perceive and portray concrete personal and social reality.²

A quarter century following the events of Yom Kippur 1973 one such treatment was offered by Rabbi Haim Sabato in his autobiographically

1 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (JPS, 1983), 28–29.

2 Aharon Lichtenstein, "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," in *Judaism's Encounter With Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, edited by Jacob J. Schacter (Jason Aronson, 1997), 248. For more on this theme in the thought of R. Lichtenstein, see my, "The Best That Has Been Thought and Said by Rabbi Lichtenstein About the Role of Literature in Religious Life," *TRADITION* 47:4 (2015), 240–249.

inspired novel, *Ti'um Kavvanot (Adjusting Sights)*.³ The imagery of sanctifying the waxing moon, and the implicit fear of darkness and waning, alongside the themes of *kiddush levana* in which the moon's phases are compared to the Jewish nation and the vagaries of our history, are not in any way out of place in this literary masterpiece penned by a "halakhic man": "[T]he moon, the Sages said . . . was like the People of Israel. For as the moon's light reflects the sun, so does Israel reflect God's presence, and as the moon wanes and waxes, so the destiny of Israel fades and grows bright" (137).

The book opens as "a pure moon shone overhead . . . not a cloud hid it from sight" on the night following Yom Kippur, as the narrator (I will call him Haim to distinguish him from the author, Sabato) and his oldest and dearest friend Dov make their way to the assembly point from which they will be whisked off to battle the Syrian advance on the Golan Heights. Traversing Jerusalem's Bayit VaGan neighborhood just after the day's fast has ended, they encounter a group of Amshinov Hasidim, reciting the blessing on the New Moon customarily said with joy and dancing upon the close of the holy and awesome day. The soldiers are pulled into the circle of dancing as the Hasidim sing, "As I dance before Thee but cannot touch Thee, so may our enemies dance before us and neither touch nor harm us. May dread and fear befall them!"—repeating that malediction against "our enemies" three times. Could there be any doubt at that moment on whom the prayer, recited as they were "aiming their hearts at heaven," was directed? The Hasidim insist that Haim and Dov receive a blessing from their Rebbe. The Amshinover prays that the words of *kiddush levana* would be fulfilled in them.

The Rabbi of Amshinov clasped my hand warmly between his own two and said, looking directly at me: "May dread and fear befall them. Them and not you." We parted from him and boarded the bus. We thought we'd be back soon. During the three terrible days that followed, I kept seeing the Rabbi of Amshinov before me. I kept hearing his words. Each time fear threatened to overcome me, I pictured him saying, "Them and not you. Them and not you." That calmed me (5).

It calmed him, until the tragic "spoiler" that arrives right here in the novel's opening scene: "That calmed me. Until I heard of Dov's death. After that the old man stopped appearing."

3 Haim Sabato, *Ti'um Kavvanot* (Yediot Aharonot, 1999), in English as *Adjusting Sights*, translated by Hillel Halkin (The Toby Press, 2003). Parenthetical page references are to this English edition.

The reader immediately understands that this is no conventional war story, but something with elements of a bildungsroman *cum* guide to the perplexed, or perhaps more precisely, guide to the inner life of a perplexed yeshiva student. If, as we are told and the narrator seems to believe, the blessing of the Rebbe “could work wonders” and “his blessing was worth a great deal,” what does it mean that Dov, along with upwards of 2,650 other soldiers, did not return, and nearly three times as many were wounded, many grievously so?

The Rebbe’s blessing has the potential to save and protect, something which the narrator seems to piously believe. The author, it becomes clear, acts with a good deal more nuance. This dual-frequency is artfully achieved through the narration’s shifting of time frames and its stream of consciousness. We transport instantly from the Hasidim to the thick of battle, then back to Haim’s childhood as a fresh, five-year-old immigrant from Egypt on the streets of Jerusalem’s Beit Mazmil absorption center, and ahead to an army intelligence debriefing session after the battles in which we hear, Rashomon-like, three soldiers attempt to make sense of what happened during the chaos of the first days of the war. The narration allows the reader to encounter young Haim’s simple faith simultaneously with the matured version with which he emerges.

Through the debriefing sessions we readers are transported to the thick of battle as the Syrian planes are dropping their paratroopers meters from the Israeli tanks, as Haim’s tank is hit and he somehow escapes the flames, and ultimately—as we come to learn—how Dov was killed by a shell that had narrowly missed Haim’s own position. The three debriefers (a historian, psychologist, and intelligence officer) attempt to make sense of the insensible and unexplainable. Two of the soldiers being debriefed are yeshiva students. While their narratives are framed from a perspective of faith, no rabbi sits on the panel to question them about their trauma and to help process the aftermath. *Adjusting Sights* is Haim’s attempt (and perhaps Sabato’s as well) to perform a “spiritual debriefing.”

So how does Haim wrestle with the questions which are raised by his experiences? How does he reconcile faith in the Amshinover’s blessing and the hard realities? How does he maintain belief in the promise that “whoever sanctifies the new moon in joy,” as they apparently did in Jerusalem before departing for battle, “would come to no harm in the month ahead” (3)? How can he balance the assurances of Providence with the threat to each soldier’s body and the nation of Israel as a whole? How can he navigate between the halakhic requirement not to fear the enemy in battle or the assurance that “the dread and fear” of death itself should not befall us, and the universal human emotional realities?

True, Haim struggles with the dissonance between the Rebbe's blessing and the harsh realities in which he knows the greatest hopes were not achieved. But the young soldier-student cannot go back to the Rebbe to seek an explanation. In time, when Haim considers he might be ready to question the Rebbe, the Amshinover has already died. But if the Rebbe's blessing had meaning, how then was it possible that "our enemies" succeeded to "touch and harm us," as happened to Dov and so many others even as it may have saved the State? Sabato, unlike S.Y. Agnon, to whom he is so often compared (more on this below), offers a harmonious response to these profound national and theological questions. The questions are never fully resolved, nor are they brushed under the rug, but he does not allow them to lead to a position of bitterness or rebellion. Quite the contrary, faith is deepened because it is no longer taken for granted, but is tested in the crucible of combat and loss and mourning.

On this point there is a regrettable error in Hillel Halkin's otherwise excellent English translation. The lengthy segment in which the three soldiers are debriefed by army intelligence is a brilliant piece of narrative exposition. Haim is joined by two comrades, among whom Elhanan is a fellow *hesdernik*, as piously devoted and faithful as our narrator. He tells the tribunal about parting from his young wife Malka following Yom Kippur. "I talked to her about faith and trust in God's *Providence* . . . I knew that *Providence* is for the Jewish People as a whole and not for any individual" (98). In the Hebrew the term is *bitahon* (not *hashgaha*); the translation should present Elhanan's *trust in God's Promise*—Sabato's meaning is God's *Promise* of victory extends to the entire Jewish People, even while an individual soldier may perish as is the way of war. God's *Providence* is never in question. Elhanan, Haim, Dov and the rest go off to war in trust that God will not allow the destruction of the collective Jewish people (here embodied by the State); no such guarantee stands for any individual soldier. Of course belief in individual Providence is a foundation of faith, and certainly something the character in the novel trusts.

If the Hasidic blessing presents a particular theological thorn, the mitnagdic sendoff Haim had received hours earlier as the *hesder* students rush out from Yom Kippur was no less problematic. At the conclusion of *havdala* their Rosh Yeshiva gathers those who will soon be tested in battle in order to part "with words of Torah, for in that way you will be remembered." He sends his *talmidim* off with a passage from Maimonides:

He who embarks on the path of war, let him put his trust in the Hope of Israel who will rescue him from all harm. And let him know that he is fighting for the unity of God's name. And let him risk what he must with no fear or thought for his wife and

children. . . . And may he clear his mind of all thoughts but those of war. . . . For he must know that the blood of Israel is upon his shoulders (25, quoting *Hilkhot Melakhim* 7:15).⁴

This teaching is recalled in a half-dream while Haim grabs a “tremper” home on his first 24-hour leave from the front. As his mind wanders he remembers his comrade Roni reading from the continuation in *Hilkhot Melakhim*, a section apparently elided by the Rosh Yeshiva: “For should he not be victorious because he failed to go to war with all his heart and soul, he has as though spilled the blood of Israel, for it is written, *Let him not melt his brother’s heart as his own.*” Roni had taught this to his tank-mates as they were driving past “dazed soldiers with bruises and bandages.” It only sharpens the crisis: Not only the lives of each of the soldiers, and those of their buddies, are at stake—but the very destiny of the nation, “the blood of Israel,” and the unity of God’s name rests on the emotional mindset of each young man. How does Haim maintain that faith and courage despite the dissonance of what he knows to be the reality around him, a reality which cannot be easily reconciled with the Amshinover’s promise?

These questions are rehearsed, experienced, and related through the exhausted, dreamlike/nightmarish fog of war, on that ride back to Jerusalem one month into the fighting. Haim arrives back at the place he and Dov had set out from with the new moon of Tishre shining upon them. Now the moon of Heshvan is engulfed by clouds and he stands alone, fearful of encountering people who will “want to know where I had been, and where I was going, and what I had been doing, and what did I think. What would I say? That I had been in the war? *That I had met my own self there?*” (30, emphasis added). This idea, and the omnipresence of dreams (simultaneously a surrealist literary ploy *and* a realistic narrative device—soldiers are both exhausted and prone to nightmares), recalls a scene in S.Y. Agnon’s wartime novel, *To This Day*, set in Berlin during World War I—one Sabato may very well have had in mind. Agnon’s narrator informs his readers:

Somehow I managed to fall asleep. The reason I know I did is that I had a dream. What did I dream? I dreamed that a great war had broken out and that I was called up to fight and took a solemn

4 I recently had the opportunity to discuss these matters with R. Sabato. It occurred to me that if he located this halakha from *Mishneh Torah*, and its themes, so centrally in his novel it would be instructive to read how he has analyzed it not as literary plot point but as *gufei Torah*—what did he say about it in the context of a shiur. Although he has by now spent a long career teaching and writing about Maimonides and his *Mishneh Torah*, I could find nothing by him on this in print or in the copious archives of his yeshiva’s recorded *shiraim*. When I questioned him about it he admitted that it is “a bit curious” that he’s never substantively addressed it in that manner.

oath that if God brought me home safe and sound, I would sacrifice to Him whatever came forth from my house to greet me. *I returned home safe and sound and behold, coming forth to greet me was myself.*⁵

Haim returns having “met himself” while away at war. Yet the loss of Dov recalls “*o havruta o mituta*” (“friendship or death!” in the evocative phrasing of *Ta’anit* 23a), meaning that he has lost part of himself.

The Agnonian undertones, which have been pointed to and often misidentified in Sabato’s writing from the time of his earliest publications, are interesting intertextual connections, but often distracting. Like Agnon’s Nobel-winning Hebrew literature, Sabato’s fiction is rooted in the world and language of the *beit midrash*. This has led Israeli critics to make what they believe to be the mandatory comparisons between the two. It should be noted, this is not always done to praise a Hebrew author, any more than a contemporary English writer would like to hear a back-handed compliment that his sentence structure is identical to Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Even when an author is inspired by a giant on whose shoulders he or she stands, this hopefully does not translate into a parrotting of style that would put them at a remove from their contemporary readers. Agnon’s Hebrew is a richly woven tapestry of allusions and word-plays to rabbinic literature. The intertextuality is almost the very subject of his writing itself.⁶

In depicting serious yeshiva students as his protagonists, Sabato all but invited the critics to misread his depiction of the inner speech of a community for whom Torah study is part of the warp and woof of daily life and language and presume he is putting on Agnonian airs. Uninitiated contemporary Hebrew readers may have been sadly unaware that there are people who actually speak like this! When the letters of Dov Indig, the model for the novel’s character of the same name, were posthumously published (in English as *Letters to Talia*), the world saw that Sabato wasn’t aiming for Agnon’s labyrinthine Hebrew—that’s how *benei yeshiva* speak! In fact, Sabato’s Hebrew, despite its many references to rabbinic sources and poetic flourishes is straightforward and simple while still elegant—not at all “ornamented” in Agnonian ways. When the soldiers are in the tank they speak in tank-talk, with all its contemporary slang.

5 S.Y. Agnon, *To This Day*, translated by Hillel Halkin (The Toby Press, 2009), 86. The reference is, of course, an allusion to the episode of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11. Earlier, Agnon’s narrator, while speculating about etymologies, considered the odd connection: “Little by little my eyes grew heavy until, thinking of *halom*, dream, I fell asleep and dreamed of war, *milhama*” (39).

6 I am borrowing here from ideas I first explored, in a different context, in “Unhappy Families: Elhanan Nir’s *Rak Shnenu*,” *TheLehrhaus.com* (February 14, 2018).

The dialogues of the non-religious soldiers are authentically crass, although what in all likelihood would have in reality been juicy swear words have been toned down or filtered out (a concession Sabato may be making in deference to his day-job as a Rosh Yeshiva). In Agnon, even characters representing simple, unlearned Jews who would have been speaking in Yiddish in real life are often “translated” into a type of baroque Agnonian pseudo-rabbinic Hebrew.

This confusion on the part of the critics has caused them to overlook much more constructive comparisons to Agnon, novelistic elements, such as that cited above, which Sabato earns through hard labor, and which pay off in the story-telling and aesthetic literary experience.⁷ For example, in *Adjusting Sights* we are presented with the great Egyptian miscalculation: by launching a surprise attack on Yom Kippur it made the Israeli mobilization easier. Moreover, Sabato shifts focus from the larger, militaristic, international stage to the inner, spiritual dimension—the timing also, or primarily, fostered a *moral* mobilization. In this far more essential way, much deeper than peppering characters’ speech with the sayings of Abaye and Rava, he is lifting a page from Agnon’s playbook. His differs with war narratives of other Israeli writers who often question the need to kill the enemy; Sabato mourns the realities of war, but he is never conflicted. We do not encounter the secular Israeli military slogan of “*milhemet ein bereira*” (a war of “no choice”) but the halakhic framework of “*milhemet mitzva*.” This offers the moral rationale, and elevates the war from one of salvation of a political entity to one of national redemption.

The novel opens with the purification effected by the holy day of Yom Kippur, perhaps as a symbol of Israel’s “purity of arms,” and this contextualizes the framework of military engagement.⁸ For Sabato we see this question taken up as an experiment in writing a modern novel from within a Talmudic tradition, rather than from within a literary tradition. In this regard he again differs from Agnon, who spent his long career reading the classics of western civilization in parallel with rabbinic texts, pulling on each to integrate the two. Sabato is more simplistic and direct—but

7 Another example might be found in the use of *tefillin* as a symbol in *Adjusting Sights*, comparing it with Agnon’s use of the same in his great novel *A Guest for the Night*, especially chapter 8 (where it plays a significant role in the depiction of the soldier’s life and faith in the trenches of World War I).

8 In the Israeli army “purity of arms” or *tohar ha-neshek* is a central ethical principle of the I.D.F. Doctrine: “The Israel Defense Forces servicemen and women will use their weapons and force only for the purpose of their mission, only to the necessary extent and will maintain their humanity even during combat. I.D.F. soldiers will not use their weapons and force to harm human beings who are not combatants or prisoners of war, and will do all in their power to avoid causing harm to their lives, bodies, dignity and property.”

that perfectly suits his purpose; his straightforward exposition underscores his moral straightforwardness, and in this he produces Haim—his fully-reliable narrator (who has not one iota of Agnonian irony and guile).

The frequent comparisons have also masked other elemental differences between their writing and artistic agendas. For Sabato there is a more harmonious reaction to the burning questions of modern Jewish life.⁹ Consider, again, the Rebbe's blessing reported to "work wonders" but not for Dov and so many others. Haim's faith is deepened because it is no longer taken for granted, but tested against trauma and loss. Haim, like his author, suffers no crisis of doubt. His sights are adjusted where it matters, in standing before God, even as his firing scope is misaligned and his flaming tank is stuck in the mud. Haim finds a way through. In a short essay (published in this issue of *TRADITION* in an original translation), R. Sabato, speaking more clearly autobiographically, not through the gauze of a fictionalized memoir, discusses arriving at a mature understanding of the events that engulfed him as a young man (and offers a telling comparison to the experiences and worldview of Rav Shagar). Recalling events of 25 years ago, midway between the 1973 war and our own day, he describes his appearance at a memorial event where he was asked by the moderator, "What of the pain, the fear, the burned tanks around you, your good friends—what did it do to your faith?"

I answer him: Every moment my faith grew stronger. I can't explain to you why. Maybe because I saw with my own eyes what a person's life is, and I stood alone in front of my Creator. Perhaps from the power of a pure, simple prayer. Everything I learned all my life, everything I read and heard in yeshiva, concerned simple faith. These feelings of the heart burned in me to such an extent that I remember saying to myself then: I know the day will come when the heart will be numb. I know days will come when I will have forgotten everything. Such is the way of the world. New things sweep out the old, heartbreak gives way in the face of routine—and who knows what my faith will be then. Therefore, I said to myself during the war, I will write on a note what is inscribed in my heart. And every time I weaken in my faith, I will look at it and remember.

9 In Ruth R. Wisse's term, Sabato's "work is unencumbered by modern angst." See her recent essay, "The Sage and Scribe of Modern Israel," *MosaicMagazine.com* (December 5, 2022). Some of my thinking in this essay was influenced by Wisse's seminar on "Jews and Power" delivered at the Tikvah Advanced Institute in New York (December 2014), and in subsequent conversations over the years. For my take on Agnon's complex transactions with modernity see "Bridging the Unbridgeable Divide Between Religion and Secular Modernity," *MosaicMagazine.com* (December 10, 2018).

In the telling, the note is a poem, which also appears in *Adjusting Sights*. The poem is lost and preserved only in memory—but there’s a meta-literary turn at work.¹⁰ Can we doubt that the act of writing “in his heart” as a buffer to doubt and a pillar to faith is none other than the literary works Sabato has been producing over the past quarter century? Through his writing we are witness to a variety of constructing “second simplicity.” The “power of pure simple prayer” which becomes the source of faith itself is depicted with great force in one of the most memorable scenes, one which supplies the novel’s title. Unable to maintain a steady prayer regime during the worst days of the war, and unable to properly concentrate (*le-ta'em kavvana*—the brilliant wordplay which carries the double entendre of the gunner’s need to calibrate, or adjust, the tank’s gun sights in order to hit its target, and the struggle to pray with proper intention), he finds prayer “hopeless.” Thoughts of Dov, who had gone missing, presumed K.I.A. on the first day of the war flood his mind when he tries to pray. But suddenly, he confesses, “the war had taught me what concentration in prayer was.”

[I]n the ambush in Nafah quarry, with no radio, with an auxiliary charger for ignition and unadjusted gun sights and the missiles coming closer and the tanks around us bursting into flames. Gidi had shouted: “Gunner, pray! We’re taking fire!” I prayed. There wasn’t a hair’s breadth then between my heart and my lips. I had never prayed like that before (22).

This is more than “pure, simple prayer,” it is *point blank prayer*. *Kavvana* is almost extraneous; there is no need to fiddle adjusting the “sights” to shoot one’s prayer to Heaven when one has direct access. In his essay, published now in *TRADITION*, Sabato admits what he bashfully omitted from *Adjusting Sights*: As he leapt from the burning tank he shouted, “I place the Lord before me always!” Until Sabato, no Jew had imagined Maimonides’ metaphor of standing in the palace of the king as escaping a burning tank.

Adjusting Sights opens and closes with *kiddush levana*, and the moon’s symbolism of the Jewish people, waxing and waning. It opens with the new moon of Tishre and its purity and potential. A month later the new moon of Heshvan (*Mar-Heshvan*, the “bitter” month), brings muddled, agonizing confusion and nightmares. Two months after the opening we

10 Compare this to Agnon’s cases of poetic works which, once composed, are lost yet obtain a metaphysical existence and force: S.Y. Agnon, “*Le-Fi ha-Tza’ar ha-Sakhar*” and “*Ha-Siman*” in *Ha-Esh ve-ha-Etzim* (Schocken, 1962), 5–19 and 283–312, the latter in English as “The Sign,” in *A Book That Was Lost* (Toby Press, 1995), 397–429.

arrive at the denouement, on a dark and cold night in Kislev, midwinter's dark nadir. Haim and Shlomo sit on a rock aside their tank, an impromptu *Melava Malka*, waiting for the moon to reveal herself from behind a cloud and receive their blessing. Dov's absence is omnipresent. The yeshiva student-soldiers sing the hymns of *Motza'ei Shabbat*, dine on a half-tin of sardines and a scrap of bread, and plumb the weighty matters of faith. Thinking back to the Amshinover, the Rosh Yeshiva, and Roni's teachings, Haim asks himself: "How could that be? How could Maimonides tell anyone not to fear war?"

We all knew it wasn't the cold of the Golan that made our hands shake and our teeth chatter. How could we not have been afraid? . . . But if we look closely at Maimonides' always impeccable language, we see that he forbade not the fear of war itself, but the yielding to it. A man must not weaken himself and his will to fight by thinking of the horrors of war: it is this that the Torah forbids (141).

And yet, he is still troubled by the Maimonidean assertion that "whoever goes to war without fear, with a pure mind and a whole heart, will come to no harm and return home safely." This simply does not correlate with Haim's experience, and he protests:

How could Maimonides say such a thing? Surely, no one is guaranteed against the Angel of Death. As we were debating this, we remembered a passage we had studied in yeshiva from *The Guide of the Perplexed* in which Maimonides writes that he himself was surprised by an "extraordinary speculation" which was revealed to him concerning the nature of the world and God's Providence which is extended to one who cleaves to Him with all his heart. I wondered who can attain such lofty a position?¹¹

As the novel draws to its close, returning for the third appearance of *kid-dush levana*, which like the "third resolving verse" navigates the contradictions of the earlier dissonant uses of that symbol, the central question is turned around. We cannot understand why Dov and so many others perished; instead we question the arbitrary appearance of Providence for those who survive and go forward with a need to make meaning of their own lives.

"Sometimes," Shlomo said, "God is merciful even to the undeserving. The individual himself may not know why." "Yes,"

11 *Guide* III:51; see specifically the Shlomo Pines edition, vol. 2, pp. 624–625 ("A most extraordinary speculation . . ."). I have finessed Halkin's more figurative translation (compare p. 142 in the English to p. 164 in the Hebrew original).

I agreed. “That’s why David says in his Psalms, *Who remembers us in our low estate, for His mercy endures forever* [Psalms 136:23].”

Suddenly the moon peeks out from the enveloping darkness, from behind the clouds and the fog, they recite the blessing and wish each other “*Shalom Aleichem!* Peace be upon you!” It is not a greeting, but a prayer each extends to the other and to himself, offered without a hair’s breadth between heart and lips.

A Torah of Trauma: Rav Shagar and the Yom Kippur War

When the Syrian and Egyptian armies invaded at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War, they found Israel vastly unprepared for the attack. Israeli troops at the borders were quickly overcome, and the enemy pressed its advantage, advancing far quicker than anyone thought possible. In response, massive numbers of reservists were called up to reinforce Israel's defenses, most having no idea what awaited them. At the time, Rav Shagar (R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, 1949–2007) was a recently married Kollel student at Yeshivat HaKotel, where he would later go on to serve as a teacher and interim Rosh Yeshiva. He received his orders soon after Yom Kippur ended and quickly arrived at his designated military base, only to find it in disarray. Soldiers were being sent to the front with only the vaguest orders. Shagar and his two tankmates, whom he had known for some time, rushed to prepare and were eventually sent to the Golan Heights as part of the efforts to arrest the Syrian advance.

Somewhere near Rosh Pina they saw dozens of people standing by the road waving at them, trying to get the young soldiers' attention. Knowing it was likely they had not eaten in the rush to war, they threw apples to them. Immediately, a spirited halakhic debate arose between Shagar's tankmates, Shaya and Shmuel, about the halakhic status of the fruit. With Rosh Hashana just ten days before, the *shemitta* year had only just ended. While some may have seen the focus on halakhic minutiae as out of place given the circumstances, Shagar felt differently. In his eyes, his friends' conversation reflected a "profound *devekut*."¹ Even as they headed off to battle and perhaps even death, their love of Torah knew no bounds.

Within hours, if not minutes, they arrived at the battle of Nafah Quarry, where they faced an onslaught of Syrian tanks. As soon as they entered the field of combat, their tank was hit by enemy fire, killing both Shaya and Shmuel. Shagar somehow managed to free himself from the flaming

1 Rav Shagar, *Ba-Yom ha-Hu: Derashot u-Ma'amarim le-Mo'adei Iyar* (Shagar Institute, 2012), 106. This article draws its description of the events from Shagar's essay in that book, "*Zakharti Hesed Ne'urayikh*."

wreckage but was severely injured. Left in total shock, he was barely able to hide until later rescued and flown to Maimonides Hospital.² A few days later, his close friend and longtime *havruta*, R. Yair Dreyfuss, would visit him there. Covered in burns and wrapped in bandages, Dreyfuss barely recognized his dear friend, but one thing stood out. Shagar told him in no uncertain terms, “The battlefield is not like it is in songs.”³

Over the next few weeks of fighting, the Syrian and Egyptian armies would be repelled, but the damage to Israel had already been done. Thousands of soldiers were dead, nearly five times as many were injured, and hundreds remained captured in enemy hands. The miraculous victory of the Six Day War had ushered in a euphoric belief in Israel’s invincibility, but the Yom Kippur War had tragically proved it to be false. The army and government had been unprepared for the war, and the soldiers sent to the front, like Shagar, had paid the price. If the defining moment of the Six Day War was the sounding of the *shofar* at the Kotel, heralding redemption, the defining moment of the Yom Kippur War was the wail of air raid sirens on Judaism’s holiest day, signaling that Israel stood at the abyss. As the poet Haim Gouri later put it, the sirens on Yom Kippur were not a call to arms but the cry of “an existential threat,” that announced a return of “Jewish existential fear . . . which the Land of Israel evidently did not exempt us from . . . of life on the verge of being ended.”⁴ At the war’s end, Israeli society did not yet have the language to describe what had taken place, but over the decades, it became clear that the most appropriate word was trauma. Both the soldiers who returned from battle and Israeli society as a whole were traumatized by the events of the war, and the effects have been felt ever since.

The Traumas of War

Derived from the Greek meaning wound, trauma has come to describe not only injuries to our bodies but to our psyches as well. In the wake of World War I, Sigmund Freud was one of the first to document that many soldiers remained haunted by their experiences. Even those who returned from combat uninjured were consumed by memories of what they had been through. They felt compelled to return to their war

2 Shagar was rescued from the battlefield by R. Yaakov Medan, who would go on to become the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion. Shagar and Medan were well-known for their embrace of creative approaches to Torah study, but often differed in their religious outlook towards political questions. A dialogue between them about the meaning of the Second Intifada can be found in *Beriti Shalom* (Yediot Books, 2020), 108–119.

3 Yair Dreyfus, *Negi’ot bi-Sfat ha-Lev* (Yediot Books, 2013), 159.

4 Yoram Meltzer, “Haim Gouri Tells About the Yom Kippur War” [Hebrew], *HaSafranim Blog* (November 3, 2020), available at <https://blog.nli.org.il/haim-guri-kipuur-war>.

experiences, especially in their dreams, despite every effort to move on with their lives. According to Freud, this phenomenon, what we now refer to as PTSD, resulted from traumatic experiences that caused excessive stimulation leading to overloading the psyche.⁵ War, of course, is full of such things, for it means facing unimaginable horrors such as the taking of human lives, the gruesome death of one's friends, the maiming of one's own body, or the prospect of one's own death. Traumatic experiences like these seemed to leave a permanent mark on the psyche and elude our ability to easily make sense of them.

Because of its intensity, trauma demands a response, and as Freud noted time and again, the most common one is repression. Rather than confront it directly, those who undergo trauma do all they can to resist engaging with their pain. It is common for those who experience trauma to search for a scapegoat who can be held accountable, and whose punishment can be viewed as potentially putting things right. This applies not only to individuals but to societies as well, where the search for a scapegoat often manifests in the political realm. Yet, finding one rarely achieves the desired results, which Israel's response to the Yom Kippur War makes clear. As the shock of the war rippled through Israeli society, fierce protests emerged against the government's handling of the war. Many were led by those who had fought in the war and seen their friends die. In response, the government established the Agranat Commission to examine the handling of the war. It eventually concluded that the highest echelons of the army and government must be held responsible for Israel's lack of preparedness, intelligence failures, and mismanagement of the conflict. Several senior army officers were dismissed, and the ensuing controversy forced Golda Meir to resign as prime minister. While laudatory that Israel was able to scrutinize its failings, it soon became clear that the conclusions of the Agranat Commission satisfied no one. The army's aura was left in shambles, and in just a few years, the Labor Party's political hegemony, which had been supreme since the founding of the state, would come to an end. For many Israelis, the traumas of the war brought an end to Zionism's innocence, and Israel would never be quite the same.

Don't Worry, Redemption is Coming

If the Yom Kippur War was a transformational event for much of Israeli society, the reaction within the Religious Zionist community appeared far more muted. To understand why requires recognizing trauma not merely

5 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Stratchey, vol. 18 (London, 1955), 29.

as a political problem but a theological one as well. Religion's greatest strength may be that it offers a way to make sense of trauma by placing it in a larger framework of meaning. If it can be explained as a punishment for sin, it no longer is felt to be arbitrary and senseless, and even if no sin can be found, it can still be understood as a necessary part of God's plan, albeit inscrutable in the here and now. Religion not only seeks to explain trauma, but also holds out the promise that all traumas can be rectified. Though one may suffer in this world, being a loyal servant of God means one can expect to receive their just reward in the World to Come. One might not even have to wait that long, for when the messiah comes, all earthly suffering will be transformed into salvation. From a certain religious perspective, trauma is at worst a passing phenomenon. It may be painful in the moment, but it is only a matter of time until it is eventually redeemed.

While many secular Israelis saw the war as a tragic mistake that led to unnecessary loss of life, Religious Zionism would take a different view. With the victory of the Six Day War just a few years earlier, messianic anticipation had been rampant. The Jewish people's return to the Land of Israel had placed them on the path to redemption, and the Yom Kippur War was understood through this narrative. This perspective was powerfully expressed by Rabbi Yehuda Amital at the time of the war. He argued that Syria and Egypt's attack should not be viewed as a regional conflict but as a religious war between those chosen by God and those who oppose Him. Choosing to attack on Yom Kippur, Judaism's holiest day, revealed the conflict's spiritual dimensions. Syria and Egypt's defeat was not only a victory for Israel but for God Himself as well because the Jewish people represent the divine idea in the world.⁶

Despite the significant losses incurred, R. Amital felt the war only served to confirm the messianic narrative laid out by R. Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook. It was R. Amital's hope that Israel's victory would finally compel all of Religious Zionism to fully embrace a Zionism of redemption. Rather than see the war as caused by the government or army's negligence, it was to be viewed as the inescapable outcome of being God's chosen people. Because of the Jews' unique mission, some nations will see Israel as a threat, and therefore, the Jewish people will constantly be called upon to defend themselves.

6 For R. Amital's perspective in 1973 see the chapter from his *Ha-Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim* elsewhere in this issue, and Yehudah Mirsky's accompanying essay. For the most comprehensive review to date of Religious Zionism's response to the war, including that of R. Amital and Rav Shagar, see Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz, *Me-Metziut le-Safa: Ha-Tzionut ha-Datit ve-Milhemet Yom ha-Kippurim* (Carmel, 2023), reviewed by Shlomo Fischer in this issue as well.

For R. Amital, there was no need whatsoever to confront the horrors of the war or the failures of the state that may have caused them. Though the war brought death and destruction, the Jewish people could remain absolutely confident that the long hoped for messianic future was just ahead. Yet, while this approach may sound inspiring, it should be viewed with some caution. Jews yearn for redemption, but it is not hard to see how this yearning can be used to avoid confronting trauma and thereby serves as a form of repression. In the years following the war, Religious Zionism would channel its messianic enthusiasm into the establishment of the Gush Emunim movement and the settlement-building enterprise. Whatever problems the war had raised, many in Religious Zionism felt they could be avoided through further dedication to the eschatological vision of Greater Israel.

Faith Mixed with Darkness

Though some religious soldiers may have aligned themselves with R. Amital's perspective, Rav Shagar was most certainly not among them.⁷ Rather than see the war as a confirmation of his beliefs, the trauma he experienced caused him to reevaluate his religious worldview. Ten years after the war, at a gathering of soldiers who had gone on to teach in *yeshivot hesder*, he offered the following reflection:

In relation to the Yom Kippur War—on the one hand, the things, the events, everything that happened brings a lot of faith to everyone who feels such things. But my faith, as I feel it, is not always a clear faith. What this means is that there is shadow in it, there is darkness in it, there are perplexities in it.⁸

While others may have emerged unscathed from the war, Rav Shagar found that it cast a dark shadow on his life. Those who follow the teachings of Rav Kook see faith as a brilliant light that illuminates all of existence, but Rav Shagar processed his experiences quite differently.⁹ His friends' tragic deaths caused him to realize that faith does not always

7 It should be noted that R. Amital and Rav Shagar, 25 years his junior, would go on to develop a personal relationship; R. Amital spoke at the special gathering convened by Shagar's students when he was close to death. In the speech he compared Shagar to the Talmudic sage Rabbi Meir, whose teachings were profound but not fully understood by his contemporaries. See Elhanan Nir, "Be-Tzel ha-Emuna," *Makor Rishon* (June 18, 2017).

8 "Hodayat Asor," *Kotleinu* 11 (1984), 155.

9 Though Shagar disagreed with R. Kook on many key issues, he still saw himself as following in R. Kook's path. For more on the similarity between the two, see Zachary Truboff, *Torah Goes Forth From Zion: Essays on the Thought of Rav Kook and Rav Shagar* (Torat Emet, 2022).

shine as brightly as we may like. Sometimes, it is mixed with darkness. When urged to hold a *se'udat hoda'a* (a meal of thanks) to celebrate surviving the war, he explained that though he wished to, he was unable. Not due to a lack of faith and gratitude, and “Not because, God forbid, I reject the good I experienced—rather ‘How can we sing a song to God?’ [Psalms 137:4]. I am not capable of doing this. Am I to have a *se'udat hodaya*? What about my friends who did not merit to do so?”¹⁰ That his life continued while Shaya and Shmuel's were cut short caused him lifelong anguish. Their deaths weighed heavily upon him, and the result was that Religious Zionism's simple narrative of exile and redemption no longer made sense to him as it once did.

Few would have dared to voice such doubts publicly, but at that same gathering of soldiers, Rav Shagar confessed that his experiences raised hard questions.

When we think about it [the war], it raises questions [concerning] our entire ideology, I mean the Religious Zionist ideology. I think there is a big question mark on this whole issue, and that people haven't dug deep, they haven't contemplated, they haven't grasped the answers to the shadow which hovers over faith.¹¹

A redemption narrative can solve many problems, but only if one is willing to look away from trauma. However, as Rav Shagar later argues, this is not the way a Jew should act—as demonstrated by Moses. When Moses first confronts Pharaoh with the word of God and demands the liberation of the Jewish people, Pharaoh refuses to listen and cruelly inflicts further suffering upon the Israelite slaves. As a result, people direct their anger at Moses, making clear that God should punish *him* for his role in their predicament. After confronting the traumatic suffering of the people, Moses turns to God and questions all that has occurred:

O my Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people (Exodus 5:22–23).

According to Rav Shagar, Moses' words reflect not passing frustration but a real crisis of faith that “occurs to every true believer.”

Every person who aspires to true goals sometimes sees reality slap him or her in the face, contradicting their faith and their goals. This is a sign of true faith. Faith that never can fail is suspect,

10 Rav Shagar, *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 107.

11 “*Hodayat Asor*,” 155.

because it is a faith that does not try to grapple with actual reality. It doesn't try to bring itself to expression in everyday life. For one whose faith is not real for him, it can never fail; for the one who grapples with reality, he will lose faith in his mission and abilities many times. This also happened to Moses our teacher.¹²

All those who desire a better world and strive to make it possible will inevitably encounter moments that challenge their faith. To raise questions and experience doubt, Rav Shagar argues, does not mean one's faith is flawed but shows that it is real. Faith which cannot make a space for trauma can only sustain itself through repression and often in a violent manner. Shagar describes this exact phenomenon through an account of a symposium he once attended, which left him greatly unsettled. One of the presenters shared that in a previous forum he had ejected a speaker who questioned whether the Jewish State could possibly end in destruction like the first and second Temples. According to Rav Shagar, "The presenter used this story to praise the certainty of faith."¹³ Rav Shagar, however, "was terrified." To avoid encountering the possibility of trauma, he had embraced messianism and made "an idol out of faith."¹⁴

On this point, Rav Shagar's critique of faith fueled by messianism echoes Freud's description of religion as an illusion and even a fetish. "Illusions," Freud notes, "need not necessarily be false."¹⁵ However, one believes an illusion because one *wants it to be true* and not because one knows it to be true. Illusions can only be sustained through "a disavowal of reality."¹⁶ If our knowledge or experience of the world contradicts our religious belief then they must be in error. Under these conditions, Freud explains, faith is treated as a fetish, an idolatrous object one clings to in order to ward off the anxiety of living in a world overrun by so much pain, suffering, and trauma.¹⁷

After the war, much of Rav Shagar's efforts were dedicating to showing that faith can make a space for trauma. To show this, he pointed to Moses' words as interpreted by Rabbi Akiva. According to R. Akiva, what Moses really meant when he challenged God was, "I know that You [God] will eventually redeem the Jewish people, but what do you care about

12 Rav Shagar, *Panekha Avakesh* (Shagar Institute, 2008), 99.

13 Rav Shagar, *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 1 (Shagar Institute, 2012), 269–270.

14 Ibid.

15 Sigmund Freud, "The Future of an Illusion," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, Vol. 21 (London, 1955), 31.

16 Ibid., 43.

17 Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. 21 (London, 1955), 152–158.

those stuck underneath a building?”¹⁸ In facing the Jewish people’s suffering, Moses did not lose faith in redemption, but Pharaoh’s rejection revealed a dark truth. Not every Jew will make it out of Egypt. Some will perish long before they cross the Red Sea. As R. Akiva understands it, Moses’ faith must acknowledge a reality of pain and suffering that cannot be denied. For R. Akiva, Rav Shagar argues, this interpretation was not just theoretical but personal. After proclaiming Bar Kochba to be the messiah, he lived to see the Romans crush the revolt and slaughter tens of thousands of Jews. Like Moses, he was forced to confront the tragic loss of life incurred by redemption’s delay while still not giving up hope in its eventual arrival. Though left unstated, it appears Rav Shagar felt the same as well. Though redemption eventually will come for the Jewish people, what of Shaya and Shmuel, who died in the burning wreckage of the tank?

The Void: Questions without Answers

To find a religious language that could give voice to what he had experienced, Rav Shagar would eventually turn to Rabbi Nahman of Breslov’s teachings about the Void (*halal ha-panui*).¹⁹ Based on the Lurianic creation myth, R. Nahman explains that God faced a profound dilemma when He desired to create the universe. Because God was *Ein Sof* (infinite light without end) there was no space for anything else. Therefore, the first act was to create not something but *nothing*, and He achieved this through *tzimtzum* (contraction) that created a Void in which the world could come to be.²⁰ However, the Void presents a problem of its own, a theological paradox of sorts. Its existence implies there is space empty of God even though such a thing should not be possible because “there can be nothing apart from His essence.” For R. Nahman, the existence of the Void is not just a theological puzzle but has profound consequences for religious

18 *Shemot Rabba* 5:22.

19 For an overview of why Rav Shagar saw R. Nahman’s writings as important, see *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 2, 467–478. For additional examples of Shagar’s use of the Void, see “Justice and Ethics in a Postmodern World,” and “Living with Nothingness,” in Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age* (Maggid, 2017).

20 *Likkutei Moharan* I 64:1. Rav Shagar’s use of the Void is best understood through a psychoanalytic lens, as will be made clear. It is rooted not in a general sense of meaninglessness that pervades modern life, as suggested by scholars of Jewish mysticism, such as Joseph Weiss and Gershom Scholem, but in the personal experience of trauma that tears a hole in the fabric of religious life. An interpretation of R. Nahman’s notion of the Void that sees it as emerging from trauma can be found in Haviva Pedaya, “Trauma, Crisis and Repair in Nahman of Braslav,” in *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life: Classical Texts, Contemporary Reflections*, ed. Lawrence Fine, Eitan Fishbane, and Or Rose (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), 171–182.

life. While many religious questions have answers, the existence of the Void stands to remind us that some questions must remain without them.

As R. Nahman goes on to make clear, the questions that emerge from the Void are most often associated with trauma. He cites the Gemara that while on Mount Sinai, Moses was shown a vision of R. Akiva's brutal death at the hand of the Romans and questions the Almighty: "Is this Torah and its reward?" God responds by telling him he must remain silent, for even Moses must accept the immutable reality of the Void.

After the trauma of the war, Rav Shagar was plagued by his own questions without answers. As R. Dreyfus explains, he "lived with the awareness that his survival and the death of his friends was not the result of divine providence, but rather was a coincidence, a random event, a consequence of the Void."²¹

The child of Holocaust survivors, Rav Shagar saw the Void not only in the war but in the Shoah as well. His parents never spoke of their experiences and instead, "they lived their lives with a stubborn muteness that hid that for which there was no repair."²² This is perhaps not surprising, for R. Nahman explains that language always fails in the face of the Void, because it is a place where "there is no spoken word or intellect."²³ Though the Shoah is often described as evil, language can grasp things that are evil and name them as such. However, the Shoah's horrors were so extreme that "evil" cannot fully describe them. Without language to express what they had experienced, Shagar's parents were condemned to "live their lives in the Void opened up by the Shoah."²⁴ In turn, Rav Shagar felt his parents' traumas as his own, like an inherited disease passed down from generation to the next, and he describes it in poetic language:

For me, the Holocaust is a black hole of existing non-existence; a horror illuminated by the midday sunlight; it is an atrocity able to negate everything; it occurred in a world that continues to spin on its axis This is a reality that leads to being stuck, without the ability to escape and without the ability to disappear.²⁵

21 *Negot bi-Sfat ha-Lev*, 163.

22 *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 64. Language transforming the mute pain of trauma into suffering is a major theme in R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik's "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *TRADITION* 17:2 (1978), 55–72. In it he also attests to the phenomenon of concentration camp inmates who lost their very ability to speak.

23 *Likkutei Moharan* I 64:3.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.* In this essay, Shagar also draws on Jean-François Lyotard's idea of the *differend*, which describes those things that escape language. Lyotard applies this idea to Auschwitz in his *The Differend* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

Traumas like the Holocaust create a Void that is a tear in reality. Though it cannot be seen with the naked eye, it exerts an enormous gravitational pull all around it, and it remains a brute theological fact we ignore at our own peril.²⁶

To better grasp Rav Shagar's conception of the Void as a way of understanding trauma, it is helpful to turn to the thought of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, a frequent touchstone for him.²⁷ Like R. Nahman, Lacan asserts that our world is shaped first and foremost by language, or what he calls the symbolic order, which functions as a collection of concepts, rules, and norms that structure our world and allow us to locate ourselves within it.²⁸ A human being cannot live without it because it provides us with the identity and the values that orient our lives. Furthermore, like R. Nahman, Lacan is particularly sensitive to the way in which language fails, when things stop making sense. As Todd McGowan, a Lacanian scholar, describes it:

Even though the symbolic order provides the background for all interactions, it cannot account for everything. There are always gaps and fissures, points at which language cannot signify. Its failure is not the contingent failure of a particular symbolic order, but a necessary failure inhering to symbolization itself.²⁹

The failures, paradoxes, and contradictions of language indicate what Lacan calls the "real," points of impossibility that mark where the symbolic order cannot be made whole.³⁰ However, the real is not to be seen as the enemy of language but that which sustains it. Just as R. Nahman sees the Void as necessary for creation, so too Lacan sees contradiction and paradox as essential to the symbolic order's continued function. If the meaning of language was completely fixed and could grasp all there is, there would be no place for human freedom. However, because the symbolic order is riven with contradictions, the meaning of language is never closed.

26 Dreyfus records that Shagar went so far as to describe the Yom Kippur War as "like a Shoah for our generation." See *Negot bi-Sfat ha-Lev*, 161.

27 Lacan plays an important role in Shagar's thought by way of Slavoj Žižek and Eric L. Santner. For example, see *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 21–40, 173–192.

28 On the similarity between Lacan's understanding of language and that of Jewish mysticism, see Tzahi Weiss, "On the Matter of Language: The Creation of the World from Letters and Jacques Lacan's Perception of Letters as Real," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 17:1 (2009), 101–115.

29 Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 37.

30 According to Lacan, the real is "that which resists symbolization absolutely" and is best understood as "the impossible." For more on this, see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1996), 186–187.

Take, for example, the famous barber paradox. It proposes the theoretical case of a town in which a barber shaves all men who do not shave themselves. However, the question soon arises as to who shaves the barber? If the barber does not shave himself, he cannot be the barber who shaves all men who do not shave themselves, and the same is true in reverse. The existence of this paradox and others like it, Lacan argues, reveal the fault lines in the symbolic order, thereby showing it cannot solve all the problems produced by the combination of language and logic. As a result, questions without answers inevitably remain, and encountering them is often deeply unsettling. As McGowan further explains:

When we think about the barber paradox, perhaps our head begins to hurt, but it doesn't seem inherently traumatic. Nonetheless, it should. All trauma has its basis in the logical impasses of the symbolic order like that of the barber paradox. The inability of the symbolic order to make sense of everything that it produces is traumatic. Trauma is the failure of sense—the encounter with non-sense.³¹

If Freud believed trauma occurs when the psyche is overloaded by what it cannot make sense of, Lacan and R. Nahman help show how these experiences are inherent to language, both religious and secular, that shapes our world. To experience trauma is to confront the limits of language, the points of impossibility that Lacan called the real, which defy our ability to put them into words.³² While language can provide concepts for innumerable things, there always exists that which is too much for it.

Redemption promises many things but cannot solve the problem of trauma, as even R. Nahman himself made clear. His famous teaching of the Void first appears as an interpretation of God's directive to Moses that he must go to Pharaoh, and ask for the Jewish people's freedom. Pharaoh's refusal to listen to Moses and his inability to recognize God's miracles is a manifestation of the Void. Even as redemption unfolds, one cannot deny the Void's enduring existence. To account for it, Rav Shagar would have to rethink his relationship to God and the Torah.

31 Ibid.

32 As explained by Yehuda Israely, "An event is traumatic if it rends the fragile texture of the Symbolic order. Exposure to the reality of a body maimed in a road accident reveals the virtuality of the Symbolic reality. Fundamental notions about human beings—that they have stable and enduring external form, a face, a name, characteristics, a role—collapse. Medics and emergency teams have an extensive symbolic repertoire (concept, roles) to protect them against the experience of meaninglessness associated with trauma." See Israely, *Lacanian Treatment: Psychoanalysis for Clinicians* (Routledge, 2018), 67.

The Scars of Torah

In the early years of psychoanalysis, Freud believed hypnosis would allow patients to relive repressed memories and achieve catharsis, a redemption of sorts that would alleviate their symptoms. Though this worked for a time, Freud soon discovered that much of his success was wishful thinking. Patients would claim they were cured only to soon relapse. In response, Freud developed a new approach dubbed the “talking cure.” Patients were encouraged to speak about anything and everything that came to mind, with the purpose of finding those things they could not speak about, the scars on their psyches. To the difficult task of revealing one’s trauma and confronting it, Freud gave the name “working-through.” It required the patient to “find the courage to direct his attention to the phenomena of his illness... [It] must no longer seem to him contemptible, but must become ... a piece of his personality, which has solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for his future life have to be derived.”³³ The goal of working-through was not necessarily to bring about a total recovery but to confront one’s traumas and learn how to live even while continuing to feel their effects.

In his own way, Rav Shagar saw himself undergoing a similar process after the war, as illustrated by a fascinating story told by R. Elhanan Nir, one of his prominent students. When Nir first began studying with him, he was heavily discouraged by his former teachers, who had only harsh words for Rav Shagar and his method of study.³⁴ Uncertain as to whether he should continue, Nir asked Shagar why others disparaged him in this way. Before responding, Rav Shagar paused for a moment to look at the scars on his arms from his war injuries, which served as permanent reminders of the terrible pain he bore on his body and in his soul. He then said the following:

I was wounded in battle of Nafah at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War and I was in the hospital for many months. I was wrapped in bandages and wounded. There I understood that the Torah is wrapped in bandages, covered in infinite wrappings, and that it, like me, needed to emerge from its bandages and constraints. Since then I go about with this awareness in all that

33 Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Trans. and ed. James Strachey*, vol. 12 (London, 1955), 152.

34 For more on Rav Shagar’s unique, but sometimes controversial method of Gemara study, see Yair Dreyfuss, “Torah Study for Contemporary Times: Conservatism or Revolution?,” *TRADITION* 45:2 (2012), 31–47.

I learn and teach: to take the Torah out of its bandages and expose it to the sunlight.³⁵

While we do not normally think of the Torah as covered in bandages, the Zohar states that it is to be thought of as wrapped in garments.³⁶ Why is this? Because there is a danger in seeing the Torah as made up of just stories and ordinary words rather than as divine. Therefore, one must look at the Torah's words as only outer garments that draw one to search for the divine secrets they conceal. Yet, in Rav Shagar's parable, the Torah is not wrapped in garments that hide secrets but in bandages that cover scars. What could this possibly mean?

We can perhaps again find the answer in the teachings of R. Nahman, who explained that the Void is caused not only by the paradox of creation but also by *mahloket*, the disagreements of Torah scholars.³⁷ Though the arguments of the rabbis may not seem as radical as the mysteries of creation, R. Nahman saw them as indicative of a problem no less serious. The reason Torah scholars cannot agree is because the meaning of Torah is always ambiguous. Instead of a Torah with a fixed meaning, we have received a Torah from God whose meaning is never set in stone, one in which the gates of interpretation are always open.³⁸

While this cherished idea is often pointed to as what makes the Torah beautiful, R. Nahman understood it can also be profoundly unnerving, even traumatizing. *Mahloket* reveals the inherent ambiguity of the Torah and reminds us we can never be certain of God's will or God's ways. While this may not bother us most of the time, moments inevitably arise when we are desperate for answers to our most deeply held religious questions, and yet we cannot find them. Instead, all we can see are the Torah's scars, its lack of fixed meaning, the cracks in which the Void starts to break through. To prevent this from happening, we have no choice but to wrap the Torah in bandages and impose unequivocal meanings on it to keep the Void at bay. Rav Shagar came to realize that these bandages may conceal the Torah's scars, but if wrapped too tight and for too long, the

35 Elhanan Nir, "Be-Tzel ha-Emuna." Nir also recognizes the importance of Shagar's parable when he writes, "This was his life project: not only to prevent the hardening of religiosity but to renew the Torah; to reach 'the unique truth of Torah for our generation.'"

36 Zohar 3:152a.

37 *Likkutei Moharan* I 64:4. For more on Rav Shagar's presentation of *mahloket* in R. Nahman's thought see *Luhot ve-Shivrei Luchot* (Yediot Sefarim, 2013), 383–406.

38 See Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, II:25, trans. Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago, 1963), 327–328. R. Nahman describes this as *tzerufim hadashim*, the ability for the letters of the Torah to be combined in new ways. For examples, see *Likkutei Moharan* I 36, 281, and II 8.

Torah becomes mummified, better left in an Egyptian sarcophagus more dead than alive.

For Rav Shagar, this was unacceptable. As he saw it, a Jew remains bound to God through their love of the Torah, and without this, the covenant between God and the Jewish people cannot be sustained.³⁹ Our love, he argued, demands a living Torah even if that means revealing its scars. While this can be painful, it need not turn the Torah into something ugly and repellant. Quite the contrary. It can help show what makes it so beloved to us. To better understand how this might be possible, it is helpful to see the words of the German Jewish philosopher Moses Hess (1812–1875). When asked whether sacrifices should be a part of the Jewish people’s redeemed future, Hess admitted his discomfort with the idea. Like most modern people, he recoiled at the thought of slaughtering animals to serve God. However, Hess argued he was unwilling to dismiss animal sacrifices entirely, for his love for Judaism compelled him to be open to them even as he found them troublesome. He explains it in the following manner:

The scar on the face of my beloved does not detract from my love for her, but is itself dear to me; dearer, perhaps, than her beautiful eyes, for other women may have beautiful eyes, but the scar is characteristic only of my beloved’s individuality.⁴⁰

While we may typically see a scar on another’s face as disfiguring, Hess argues it is what marks the beloved as different from all others. Though her eyes can be compared to those of other women, the scar is uniquely her’s. Rather than diminish her beauty, it is what makes her singular. For Rav Shagar, the challenge of religious life is to recognize that our love for the Torah is no different. We love it not in spite of its scars but in part because of them. Though the Torah’s ambiguity may at times be traumatic. It is also the source of the enigma that draws us to it. As R. Nahman states, our love for the Torah is “a fulfillment of ‘I am lovesick.’”⁴¹ We feel bound to it even when it doesn’t make sense and even when it might be painful for us.

39 E.g., *Be-Torato Yehege*, 25–37. This was the reason why Hazal viewed their relationship to the Torah in romantic or even erotic terms. For just a few examples, see *Eruvin* 54a, *Sanhedrin* 99b, and *Midrash Shemuel* 1, s.v. *et la’asot*. In fact, Rav Shagar’s own life is a testament to this. By dedicating himself to the studying and teaching Torah after the war, he embodied the verse “were your Torah not my delight, I would have perished in my misery” (Psalms 119:92).

40 Moshe Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem: A Study in Jewish Nationalism* (Anodos, 2019), 65.

41 *Likkutei Moharan* I 31:6 quoting Song of Songs 2:5. For Rav Shagar’s analysis of this passage, see *Shiurim al Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 2, 409–411.

Once again, psychoanalysis can help us make sense of this. According to Lacan, the process of working-through removes the bandages of repression we have placed around our trauma. However, this long, difficult task, is made harder by the fact that revealing our trauma comes with no guarantee of a cure. If anything, it can lead to the realization that the narratives we have long used to make sense of the world promise more than they can deliver. Yet, according to Lacan, the process of working-through does not end here, for even as trauma takes so much away, something always remains. The goal of analysis is to help us understand that our deepest attachments always exceed our ability to make sense of them, and therefore, they persist even in the face of trauma. Logic and reason can rarely, if ever, account for those things that matter most to us. In the words of Yehuda Israely, a Lacanian clinician, psychoanalysis leads us to see how a “desire exists in us and that it, rather than our idealized self-perception, is what determines us.”⁴² Because we are committed to seeing ourselves as fully in control, most of our lives are spent avoiding this realization. But we see this most clearly with those we love. We feel bound to them even when we cannot understand why, for even after their deaths, our love for them remains and can give meaning to our entire existence. In this sense, it is correct to call love a sickness, for embracing love means we must at times be willing, as Israely says, “to observe where our feet are taking us in order thus to understand where we want to go.”⁴³ For Rav Shagar, our love for the Torah and for God requires nothing less.

The Shade of Faith

Thirty years after the war, at a memorial event for Shaya and Shmuel, Rav Shagar offered a new interpretation of his faith. If decades before he had said that his faith had darkness in it, at this 2003 gathering just days before Sukkot, he drew from the holiday’s symbolism to find words that could describe how he felt. He noted that according to the Zohar, dwelling in the *sukka* is an experience of *tzela de-mehemnuta*, the shade of faith.⁴⁴ It is to sit with the divine clouds of glory, just a few feet above one’s head. But this is often not enough to fully satisfy us, for “we dwell in the shade of the *sukka* and not its light.”⁴⁵ The *sukka* can provide shade but little else, and though Isaiah states that “the *sukka* shall serve as shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain” (4:6), this refers

42 Israely, *Lacanian Treatment*, 90.

43 Ibid.

44 Zohar 3:103a.

45 *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 108.

only to the days of the messiah. In this world, a *sukka* is little more than three walls. It is a flimsy structure, not a fortress.

One thinks that the *sukka*, which is called faith and trust in God, protects him on a physical level. However, a person sees with his eyes that a *sukka* does not protect us in the reality of our lives. . . . The divine providence we all believe exists in the world is like shade and not like light The relationship to war is not just a relationship to pain, rather it is also a relationship to *hester panim* (the hiding of God's face), of questions, of shade—the shade of faith.⁴⁶

If faith guaranteed us security and happiness, we would easily live a happy life. We would be protected from any traumas we might encounter, confident we have answers to any question that might emerge. But faith is unable to offer us these things, for like a *sukka* it cannot even protect us from the rain. Why then would one want to have anything to do with it? What possible reason could there be to dwell in the shade of faith? For Rav Shagar, the answer is to be found in Song of Songs, a tale of two lovers, and to make his point, he cites the verse, “Like an apple tree among trees of the forest, I delight to sit in his shade” (2:3). While we might think it enjoyable to sit under the apple tree, the *midrash* disagrees and explains it provides little comfort when the sun begins to blaze. Why is this?

Because it has no shade to sit in. So too it was the case when the nations of the world fled from dwelling in the shade of Holy One Blessed Be He on the day of the giving of the Torah. Is this true also about Israel? The Torah says: “I delight to sit in his shade.” I delight in it and dwell in it. It is I who delight in it and not the nations.⁴⁷

When the temperature increases, those with better sense find their way indoors, and to the nations of the world, the Jews look foolish roasting in the heat. Why would Jews hold on to their faith and remain in the hot sun when there are more comfortable places to be? That they do so hardly makes them a “wise and discerning nation” in the eyes of the world. Yet their faith remains because they “delight to sit in His shade,” whatever little there may be. To love another is to be drawn to them, unable to imagine a life without them. What makes loves sublime is that it enables us to bear our trauma, to sit in the *sukka* or under the apple tree

46 *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, Ibid.

47 *Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 2:10. While Shagar doesn't mention it, the *midrash* clearly draws on *Avoda Zara* 3a–b that non-Jews reject the mitzva of *sukka* when it gets too hot.

despite the heat. Our faith may have darkness in it, and our Torah may have scars, but we still yearn to dwell in God's shade.

Embracing Trauma, Finding Faith

One of the great tragedies of religious life is that it is too often the case that faith is used to repress trauma, rather than make a space for it. In doing so, it only ensures that one can never quite escape it. Rav Shagar spent his life struggling to envision an alternative by dedicating himself to working-through the traumas of the Yom Kippur War. For some, the results of his efforts will always appear lacking, but that is partly because he cannot offer what they are looking for. Like Moses and Rabbi Akiva before him, Rav Shagar believed that redemption would come, but that day has not yet arrived.⁴⁸ Until then, Jews will have to learn to live with their traumas, whether it be the marks of Egyptian whips on their backs, tattooed numbers on their arms, or the scars from an exploding tank. They will have to accept that some questions have no answers, but that faith, nevertheless, still remains.

48 For more on Rav Shagar's complex relationship to redemption, see Levi Morrow, "Redemption Deferred: Rav Shagar's Post-Kookian Political Theology of the Future," *Proceedings of the 2020 Bar-Ilan University Conference on the Thought of Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg*, ed. Miriam Feldmann Kaye (forthcoming). Also see Zachary Truboff, *Torah Goes Forth From Zion*, 205–220.

Hebrew Poetry, Prayer, and Translation: Naomi Shemer's Songs of the Yom Kippur War

Translate (v.): early 14c., “to remove from one place to another,” also “to turn from one language to another,” from Old French *translater* and directly from Latin *translatus* “carried over,” serving as past participle of *transferre* “to bring over, carry over” (see *transfer*), from *trans* “across, beyond” (see *trans-*) + *lātus* “borne, carried” (Online Etymology Dictionary).

My academic career has been dedicated to teaching modern Hebrew and Jewish literature, and so much of my work has entailed arguing for the relevance of modern Jewish literary texts to Jewish life and learning. Rabbinical studies have always placed greater emphasis on classical, canonized texts from the distant past. My teaching often focuses on the ways in which modern Hebrew and Jewish literature and culture translates, re-interprets, and adapts classical materials. Relatedly, my scholarship has entailed translating and interpreting modern Hebrew literature from a feminist and gender studies standpoint, focusing in particular, but not exclusively, on Hebrew women poets and prose writers, on how they have rewritten and, in effect, translated the traditional script in the context of women's experience.

Recently, I have adopted a spiritual/pedagogical discipline, each week translating a different prayer-related modern Hebrew poem and offering commentary on it as part of my synagogue's morning *minyan*. This initiative, titled “*Shir Hadash shel Yom*,” a practice of translating and presenting works of modern poetry and song in the context of daily *tefilla*, including the pathbreaking works of the first generations of Hebrew women poets, is the most recent and perhaps most explicitly religious iteration of a lifelong project. Since the beginning of the *Shir Hadash* in Fall 2019, I have presented at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale morning *minyan* the work of eight different poets, spending several months on each, so that we can delve into their work with a special emphasis on mourning, liturgy, other religious themes. When the project was launched I began with Tzvi Yair (1915–2005), a little-known Chabad-affiliated American Hebrew poet, whose work lent itself easily to discussion in an Orthodox prayer setting,

before moving on to the better known Hebrew poetry of Leah Goldberg, whose stunning verse and prevalent prayer themes also offered an occasion to consider the absence of women's voices in traditional liturgy. I believe that the framework of this learning as part of the morning *minyan* (in the conventional *devar Torah*/halakha slot before the final *Kaddish de-Rabbanan*), and not as a separate "adult education" event, detached from the practice of fixed prayer, is spiritually significant and potentially transformative. It is my conviction that this practice, which draws on Israeli culture and innovation, can potentially serve as a beneficial supplement to traditional Orthodox *tefilla* and help invigorate one's prayer life. Despite pronounced differences in observance and theology, contemporary Israeli/Jewish/Hebrew culture has always sought to mine the tradition for ongoing meaning, and in this sense, serves as a vital, modern repository of commentary on classical Jewish sources. As Rav Kook famously argues in "*Ma'amar ha-Dor*," while secular Zionists have lamentably rejected prior religious ways, "there is still a shining sun of righteousness, which will bring healing in its wings, and wipe the tears off of every face." In this essay and elsewhere, Rav Kook set out to translate for a religious audience the ethical, social, cultural, and literary merits of his secular generation, a project that this current essay seeks to continue.

The endeavor of translation—of bridging cultural, linguistic, generic, and contextual divides—poses difficulties that are analogous to some of the challenges attending the enterprise of prayer. Might these difficulties and their attendant bewilderments speak to one another? Poet/translator Mark Polizzotti writes that "[l]anguage is not all about designation. Its real meanings often hover in the spaces between utterances, in the movement generated by particular arrangements of words, associations, and hidden references. This is what literature does, in the best of cases. And it's what translation can do as well."² This seems also an apt description of the workings of prayer, an act of worship hovering in the interstices between utterances and songs, in the movement between sounds, silences, overt as well as hidden references, and in the space between fixed ritual and creative intentionality.³

1 See R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook, "*Ma'amar ha-Dor*," in *Eder ha-Yakar ve-Ikvei ha-Tzon* (Mossad HaRav Kook), 108. For more on Rav Kook's view of the spiritual potential of secular literature and culture in relation to the fiction of S.Y. Agnon see Jeffrey Saks, "A Portrait of Two Artists at the Crossroads: Between Rav Kook and S.Y. Agnon," *TRADITION* 49:2 (2016), 32–52.

2 Mark Polizzotti, *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto* (MIT Press, 2018), 7.

3 Some of the philosophical and halakhic tension between this "essence and manifestation" as played out in prayer is examined by Yitzhak (Isadore) Twersky, "Standing Before the *Shekhina*" [Hebrew], in *Ke-Ma'ayan ha-Mitgaber*, ed. Carmi Horowitz (Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2020), 339–362.

I offer all of this as context for my discussion of the Yom Kippur War poetry/songs of Naomi Shemer (1930–2004), whose work was featured for over six months as the the subject of the *Shir Hadash* project, and whose songs and distinctive woman's voice have played a crucial role in Israeli culture and the formation of a kind of secular Israeli prayer. Shemer is best-known by Jews the world-over for composing "*Yerushalayim shel Zahav*" (Jerusalem of Gold) in the spring of 1967, a richly allusive song, which became associated ith the Six Day War and which for many quickly took on the status of a modern-day prayer. As I will be showing, Shemer's Yom Kippur War songs played a similar cultural role.

As Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi observe about the role of Hebrew song in the emergent culture of Israel, "[t]he construction of a new native Hebrew culture was one of the main aspirations of the Zionist enterprise. Music, embedded in both Hebrew songs and dances, was perceived as a promising field for the symbolic fulfillment of these aspirations."⁴ In the context of Zionist return to Israel, modern Hebrew poetry, set to music and sung at sing-alongs in secular *kibbutzim*, cultural centers, and elsewhere, often substituted for traditional public prayer; these songs served as a nostalgic "remnant of synagogue culture."⁵ More recently, with the waning of the Kibbutz movement, this kind of singing has relocated to *Piyyut* circles and to liberal *Kabbalat Shabbat* services, such as that of Beit Tefila Israeli, which meets on Summer Friday evenings on the Tel Aviv pier.⁶ Perhaps more than any other Israeli songwriter, Naomi Shemer's music and lyrics, composed over the course of a half-century, have played a unifying, culture-defining role, becoming part not just of Israeli secular and youth-group culture, but also finding their way into synagogue services across the denominations, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, including many mainstream Modern Orthodox communities.

Naomi Shemer's Yom Kippur War songs occupy a particularly significant place in any discussion of Hebrew poetry, song, and prayer, by virtue of the outbreak of the war on the most sacred day of the year, a day that highlights the themes of life and death that also come to the fore in distinct ways in wartime. According to R. Irving Greenberg, Judaism's general strategy with respect to death is to fight against it. Halakha gives life the highest priority. In reciting Kaddish for our close

4 Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (University of California Press, 2004), 27.

5 Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (University of California Press, 2000), 236.

6 For more on this phenomenon, and on the interpretive effect of juxtaposing traditional prayers and modern Israeli poetry, see Wendy Zierler, "Anthological Poetics," in *Since 1948*, ed. Nancy Berg and Naomi Sokoloff (SUNY Press, 2021), 59–80.

relatives we declare an unwillingness to be defeated by death. “The one notable exception to the arm’s-length treatment of death is the period of the High Holy Days. During this cluster of days, the tradition deliberately concentrates the individual’s attention on death.”⁷ On Yom Kippur we rehearse and thereby confront the fact of death: we wear white clothes to evoke the shrouds of the dead; we desist from eating and drinking and indulging sexual passions, acting like beings no longer bound by the necessities of human existence; we recite prayers like “*U-Netane Tokef*”—with its plaintive question, “Who will live, and who will die?”—which foreground an awareness of our ephemerality and mortality, the question being not if but how and when we will die.

War, of course, with its constant, ominipresent mortal dangers, transforms the figurative death-imagery of Yom Kippur into stark reality. How much more so in the case of war waged against Israel on the day itself! Some of the songs of the 1973 war thus explicitly depict this tragic coincidence. Zerubavela Sasonkin’s (1929–2004) prophetically resonant song “*Al Shelosha Pish’ei Damesek*” (For Three Transgressions of Damascus)⁸ highlights the jarring confluence of war and Yom Kippur by opening with a description of “fathers in *tallit* and military belt.” Naomi Shemer’s Yom Kippur War songs avoid this direct depiction of battle, or even of that particular Yom Kippur, but nevertheless mobilize many of the liturgical themes and associations of the day, channeling the fears, hopes, and sorrows of that time of national trauma, as well as the ongoing need, given the many crushing casualties of the war, to memorialize and commemorate, the latter itself a feature of traditional Yom Kippur *Yizkor* services.

Shemer’s biographer, Moti Ze’ira, refers to three of her songs in conjunction with this period of the Yom Kippur War. One of them is “*Anahnu Sheneinu me-Oto ha-Kefar*” (We’re Both from the Same Village), which describes two friends who share all the same experiences—taking the same route to school, working the same fields, serving in the same military units. And then comes a different kind of a field, an endless battleground, that divides them forever.⁹ One of the two is “broken”—a euphemism for death in battle—and the narrator, his surviving friend, must bring his fallen comrade back to their home village. Although originally composed in 1966, and first recorded in 1969, the song became identified in the Israeli cultural imagination with the Yom Kippur War. Many identified in the song the story of Ze’evelah and Yossele, two inseparably close friends

7 Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way* (Touchstone Books, 1988), 184.

8 See Amos 1:3. Lyrics and recording at the website of the National Library of Israel: www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL990032503060205171/NLI.

9 Lyrics and recording: www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL990032389040205171/NLI.

from the Jezreel Valley *moshav*, Nahalal; when Ze'evalah (Zev Amit z"l) was killed in the south during the Yom Kippur War, one of his grieving family members approached Shemer saying that in writing this song, she had given him an "*ayin ha-ra*" (an evil eye). For that family member, Shemer's song wasn't so much descriptive as prophetic, foreseeing the eventual separation of these lifelong friends.¹⁰ From this anecdote one immediately detects the para-religious role Shemer's songs were already playing in Israeli Zionist culture.

The two other songs by Shemer most closely associated with the Yom Kippur War are "*Lu Yehi*" (Let It Be, 1973) and "*Bekhol Shana ba-Stav, Giora*" (Every Year in Autumn, Giora, 1974), both of which date to the actual period of the war.

As Regev and Seroussi recount, "*Lu Yehi*" became an instant hit and gained the status of a secular prayer soon after its release in the Fall of 1973:¹¹

There's a white sail yet on the horizon
Against the black and heavy clouds
Everything we seek—let it be.
And if in windows in the evening
Holiday candles flicker light
Everything we seek—let it be.¹²

Let it be, let it be—Please, let it be
Everything we seek—let it be.

If the messenger stands in the doorway
Put a good word in his mouth
Everything we seek—let it be.
If your own spirit seeks to die
At flowering or gathering time
Everything we seek—let it be.

Let it be, let it be . . .

What is this sound that I am hearing¹³
Sound of shofar and of drums
Everything we seek—let it be.

10 Moti Ze'ira, *'Al ha-Devash ve-al ha-Oketz* (Keter, 2017), 309.

11 Lyrics and recording: www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL990032502820205171/NLI.

12 See Genesis 30:34: Lavan's assent to Jacob's salary plan, which also has a prayerful connotation, with its aspirational "let it be as you have said."

13 See Exodus 32:18: Moses' comment to Joshua upon descending from Mount Sinai and hearing the noise around the worship of the Golden Calf.

If only in the midst of these things
 A prayer can heard from my own lips
 Everything we seek—let it be.

Let it be, let it be . . .

In a little, shaded neighborhood
 Sits a small house with a red roof
 Everything we seek—let it be.
 It's the end of summer and the path
 Let them all return back here
 Everything we seek—let it be.

Let it be, let it be . . .

And if suddenly, amid the darkness,
 Star light shines above our heads
 Everything we seek—let it be.
 Then grant calm and also strength
 To all of those whom we love
 Everything we seek—let it be.

Perhaps more than other song by Shemer, “*Lu Yehi*” engages processes of linguistic and cultural translation. During the summer of 1973, the Beatles song “Let It Be” had been constantly playing on Israeli radio; Shemer began thinking of translating the song into Hebrew, and giving it to pop singer Chava Alberstein to sing for an upcoming solo performance, but then somehow forgot about it. Then the Yom Kippur War broke out on October 6, 1973. It was during those early days of the war, between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, that Shemer finally sat down to pen her “translation,”¹⁴ which, despite the seeming, literal rendering of the title, only vaguely approximated the original Beatles lyrics. Instead, what Shemer had created was a distinctively contemporary Israeli song of prayer. Even in the places where she borrowed directly from the imagery of the Beatles song, she transformed it into a more Jewishly resonant or Tishrei-related form. If the Lennon and McCartney classic depicted enduring hope by noting that “when the night is cloudy/there is still a light that shines on me/shine until tomorrow,” Shemer’s song remade the light imagery to evoke Jewish holiday candles trembling in the windows. If the Beatles song counters “times of trouble” with an imagined, consoling visitation of Mother Mary, the second stanza of Shemer’s song,¹⁵ uses the word

14 Ze’ira, 303–304.

15 This second stanza was removed from most but the earliest performances of the song because of the searing /trauma of this war messenger reference. Too many people were receiving such visits, without a “good word” on the messenger’s lips.

“*mevasser*” (the Hebrew word for herald, or gospel, taken from Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that brings good tidings [*mevasser*], that proclaims peace; that brings good tidings of good, that proclaims salvation”) certainly not to evoke Christian messianic tidings, but rather as a subversion of the “bearer of bad news” from the army, knocking on the door to bring the dreaded message of a soldier lost in battle. And whereas the speaker in the Beatles song refers to waking up to the sound of music, Shemer’s song, written in Tishrei 5734, features the sound of the shofar and of “*tuppim*” (drums or timbrels), bringing to mind the sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashana and at the end of *Ne’ila* on Yom Kippur, Miriam’s singing and dancing with her timbrel (*tof*), and the music of the Temple (as captured in Psalm 150).

The most salient biblical allusion in the song comes in that same stanza in the line “*Ma kol ‘anot ani shome’a*” (What is this sound that I am hearing?), a direct allusion to Moses’ descent from Mount Sinai, only to discover the people worshipping a Golden Calf (Exodus 32:18). As Moses and Joshua approach the camp, they hear an indistinct rumbling, which Joshua identifies as a “*kol milhama*” (a sound of war). Moses retorts that this is neither the “*kol ‘anot*” (responding voice) of brave victory nor of weakness and defeat, rather a “*kol ‘annot*,” vocalized with a *patah* instead of a *hataf* and with a *dagesh* in the *nun*, changing the meaning to “a sound of torture or suffering.” Shemer’s use of the phrase “this sound that I am hearing” (*kol ‘anot*) in the context of a Yom Kippur war song plays on Joshua’s reference to the sounds of war, but also mimics Moses’ identification of this noise with the sound of suffering, bespeaking the grief and torture wrought by this war, which took the Jewish State by gruesome surprise on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

In referring to this biblical scene of confusion over the tumult coming from the camp, Shemer captures the sense of ongoing fear, punishment, and uncertainty surrounding the potential outcome of the war. She also brings to mind the aftermath of the Golden Calf episode, when Moses breaks the first set of tablets, but then prays to God to forgive the people, after which he is taught God’s thirteen attributes of mercy, which come to play a central role in the liturgy of Yom Kippur. Following this line, Shemer begs her addressee: among the sounds between those voiced, let the sound of at least one prayer come from my mouth—“If only in the midst of these things / A prayer can heard from my own lips.” The secular singer-songwriter prays for the ability to pray, injecting an audible, supplicative voice into this context and designating her as a kind of *shelihah tzibbur* in the midst of a national crisis.

At first Shemer planned to set her new lyrics to the melody of “Let It Be.” But in the same way that in writing “*Lu Yehi*” she transmuted the

lyrics of the original Beatles song into an authentically Jewish and Israeli text, she eventually altered the melody, too. If the verses of the Beatles song start low and go higher, Shemer's tune inverts this pattern, starting high—as if in the air, in a state of pitched, anxious battle—and then descending, as if landing safely, or recovering from the shock of battle.

As mentioned above, “*Lu Yehi*” assumed a status of a form of prayer almost immediately. The archives of the National Library of Israel, for example, include a letter to Shemer (dated December 8, 1973) from the family of a missing soldier. “*Lu Yehi*,” the writer of the letter attests, “was a kind of *tefilla* for me, a kind of *tefilla* which aids a person of faith, comforting him.”¹⁶ This letter, with its convictions about the prayer-like quality of a popular song that was written by a secular, female, Israeli songwriter and inspired by the Beatles, epitomizes my rationale for “*Shir Hadash shel Yom*.” Namely, that the lines between secular and sacred in modern Israeli poetry are very faint and porous, and that traditional prayer stands to benefit from bringing modern voices, and those of women, too, into our experience of *tefilla*.

If “*Lu Yehi*” became a prayer for hope and for the safe return home of Israeli soldiers, Shemer's “*Bekhol Shana ba-Stav, Giora*,” served the plaintive function of Yom Kippur *Yizkor* commemoration. Bringing to mind the literal meaning of the High Holiday *Mahzor* as cycle, the title refers to the ever-returning cycle of the seasons and of yearly remembrances of the dead:¹⁷

Every year in Fall, Giora
 The crazy wind in my garden
 Cuts down my best roses.
 Every year.
 Every year in Fall, Giora,
 I lift my eyes to the mountains
 To see where my help will come
 Every year.

Every year in Fall
Every Year in Fall

You aren't alone, Giora.
 For in the place where you dwell
 Grace and compassion dwell as well.
 And Yehiam still whoops and sings
 Tuvia still grows rare black irises

16 “*Ha-Shir Lu Yehi u-Milhemet Yom Kippur*,” *Safranin Blog* (October 3, 2018): https://blog.nli.org.il/let_it_be.

17 Lyrics and recording: www.nli.org.il/he/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL990032559560205171/NLI.

And you're there
 And there are lots of other youngsters
 From whom you said "my help will come."

Every year in Fall

Every Year in Fall

Every year in Fall, Giora,
 I ask myself
 When shall I come to dwell there with you?
 My heart finally resting from its pain.
 But every year, Giora
 The crazy wind in my garden
 Cuts down my best roses
 Every year

Every year in Fall, Giora,

Every year in Fall

The song was written in response to the death of Giora Shoham, the son of Naomi's childhood friends, Rut and Shlomo. He was 21 years old when he was killed after crossing the Suez Canal on October 20, 1973. In marked contrast to the optimistic prayer-mode of "*bakasha*" (petition) and the flickering light of hope which characterize "*Lu Yehi*," this song conveys a sense of fatalistic repetition, evocative of the repetitive exercise of Kaddish recitation. The sense of recurrent, unabating sorrow is underscored by the repeated reference to a deranged wind that cuts off the heads of the roses in the speaker's garden, the word "*shoshana*" (rose or lily), evoking the allegoric representation of Israel as a "*shoshana bein ha-hohim*" (Song of Songs 2:2), or as *Shoshanat Ya'akov*, in the case of the classic Purim song, while the verb "*orefet*" calls to mind the biblical atonement ritual of the '*egla arufa*' (the decapitated calf, Deuteronomy 21:1–9), performed in the event that a body of a slain person is found in a field, and the killer was unknown. In alluding to this ritual, Shemer hints at the way in which deaths on a battlefield are analogous to those killed "anonymously," leaving communities in need of some ritual of atonement for their inability to bring the killer to justice. The theme of atonement gestures back to the fact of the war having broken out on the Day of Atonement. More specifically, the allusion to the '*egla arufa*' seems to acknowledge that there was blame to be placed for the war and yet it was unclear where to put it—that the communal leadership needed to do some stocktaking. After the Yom Kippur War there was a widespread sense that the "*ziknei ha-ir*" of modern Israel, through lack of readiness and planning and intelligence failures, could not so readily claim "our hands have not shed this blood"!

The reiteration throughout the song of “*Bekhol Shana ba-Stav*” bespeaks a form of deterministic repetition of grief and sorrow. All this fatalistic repetition notwithstanding, the song is not without its gestures—albeit unresolved and incomplete—of consolation and commemoration. Recalling Psalm 121, one of the series of psalms traditionally recited in cases of illness or in times of communal danger, the speaker lifts her “eyes to the mountains/To see where my help will come.” The speaker also attempts to bring consolation to the departed Giora himself, reassuring him that he is in good company in his place—the word *ba-makom* doubling as a specific burial place as well as *ha-Makom*, the name for God used in the traditional formula of consolation offered to a mourner.

All in all, the *Shir Hadash* project, as represented here through this translation and explication of Naomi Shemer songs, constitutes an exercise of “translation” on many levels:

- From mourning to consolation.
- From the personal, to the dialogical and the communal.
- From Hebrew to English, with accompanying annotation of classical source material.
- From fixed liturgy to “Open Siddur” (calling attention to the fluidity inherent even in the supposedly fixed liturgy).
- From poetry to prose, insofar as part of my translation work has been accompanied by spoken and written prose interpretation of the poem.
- From secular to sacred.
- From literary to liturgical.
- From words to feeling.
- From static ritual to transformation.

Some of these translation processes work in both directions simultaneously. Shemer’s songs, for one, are already the products of a process of political-theological translation of foundational religious notions and texts into secular Zionist terms and forms.¹⁸ These “translations,” in turn, when related to *tefilla*, get retranslated and re-activated with differing effects.

And so it is, that the act of translating and then studying a modern Hebrew poem or a song by Naomi Shemer at the end of a *Shaharit* service, before the final *Kaddish de-Rabbanan* that is normally recited after formal Torah study, becomes an occasion for meaning to pass across the

18 Hamutal Tsamir, “*Bein Tehom le-Ivvaron*,” *Mikan* 14 (2014), 84.

secular-sacred divide. In a *Paris Review* interview, Hebrew translator Peter Cole makes this very point, locating his attraction to Hebrew translation in an effort to pass from the left side (the English) of the biligual Bible or Siddur to the right (the Hebrew):

I felt it in prayer as well, especially in the disconcerting back and forth across the facing pages of the Hebrew-English prayer book. Opaque but luscious Hebrew on the right-facing page and the in-ert English on the left. It's as though the English side were blank, and that's what I've been writing into all my life.

"When did you pass from one page to the other?" asks the interviewer, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Joshua Cohen. Cole goes on to recount the tragic death of his younger brother and his subsequent travel to Jerusalem to study and recover the Hebrew of his youth as "a coming into a new life."¹⁹ Cole's account of delving into modern Hebrew as a means of dealing with tragic passing away of loved ones, of moving through present grief by way of the words of the past, resonates powerfully with the project of the "*Shir Hadash shel Yom*," in general, and these Yom Kippur War poems/songs, in particular. That's translation—being moved, from one place or state or mode or time or language to another. It is its own form of Atonement.

19 Joshua Cohen, "Peter Cole, The Art of Translation No. 5," *The Paris Review* 213 (Summer 2015), 154–155.

Rabbi Lamm's Resilient Response to the Yom Kippur War

By all accounts, the Yom Kippur War dealt a vicious psychological blow to the State of Israel and Jews across the globe. Many would agree with Rabbi Norman Lamm's depiction of the war as "a trauma of the order that Vietnam was for most Americans."¹

Nor did R. Lamm offer this grim assessment as an armchair commentator who had developed his impressions solely from the comfort of his Upper West Side home. He wrote and spoke from firsthand observation. As detailed in two sermons, R. Lamm visited Israel at the end of 1973, some two-and-a-half months after the outbreak of hostilities.

During his visit, R. Lamm saw the country from many vantage points. He spoke with soldiers who had lost countless comrades. He went as close to the front lines as the Israel Defense Forces would permit. He walked the streets of numerous neighborhoods, encountering mostly women—the lion's share of young men was still on active duty—and bandaged warriors returned from the field of battle. He visited Yeshivat Har Etzion, where melancholy reigned: only about a third of the students were present; fully two-thirds were still on the front lines, where many of the yeshiva's students fell in combat. He knew soldiers who perished, especially on that fateful Yom Kippur day, October 6, 1973, when religious students were among the first to fall as they sought to hold the line along the Suez Canal.

R. Lamm spoke with a University of Tel Aviv professor whose students had been subject to sadistic torture at the hands of the Egyptians. When R. Lamm and his colleague spoke by phone, the professor broke down crying, describing the fragile psychological state of his students. They were in no shape to be attending regular undergraduate classes, he explained. What they really needed were emotional support and time to heal.

These firsthand observations, coupled with deep reflection, informed R. Lamm's thoughts on the painful questions of the day. He pondered the arrogance of Israeli generals who mistakenly claimed to have everything

1 Norman Lamm, *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith* (Ktav, 2001), vol. 2, 206.

under control, which cost the country dearly; the American and Israeli intellectuals who had declared their support for Israel but abandoned her during the war; the impotence the Israeli electorate described as they went to the polls on December 31, 1973, in the first election following the war; the frustration surrounding the peace accords, which were imposed by the United States and the Soviet Union just as the war had turned in Israel's favor and the I.D.F. was arrayed some 100 kilometers from Cairo; the meaning of a war that somehow simultaneously ended in decisive victory and indelible trauma; and the sheer confusion that gripped Israel in the aftermath of the war.²

Above all, for R. Lamm the war was a painful vindication of his brand of non-messianic Zionism and his philosophy of moderationism, which called for a balanced, level-headed approach to all problems of Judaism and public policy. Given the trauma and challenges surrounding the war, R. Lamm's response was particularly notable for its call for resilience, faith, and optimism, even in the face of terror. In particular, R. Lamm's sermons and published essays in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War emphasized six themes:

1. The value of appreciating and seeking out fragments of peace even in the midst of war;
2. The dangers of divisiveness and the critical importance of Jewish unity during and especially beyond wartime;
3. A preference for steady inspiration over meteoric transformation as a driver of lasting personal and national religious growth;
4. A desire to maintain the possibility for joy while in no way diminishing the enormity of individual and national tragedy;
5. The need to strike a healthy balance between meekness and arrogance; and, above all,
6. A vindication of a realist, non-messianic Zionism that refuses to apotheosize the State of Israel or prematurely declare the advent of the messianic era.

Peace and War

On the second day of Sukkot 1973, just six days following the outbreak of hostilities, R. Lamm addressed the war in a sermon entitled "Peace in Pieces," which we will use to frame the first three themes enumerated above. Beyond the surface meaning of the sermon's title, namely that the Egyptian and Syrian invasions shattered the peace that predominated

2 See his January 12, 1974 sermon entitled "Reactions to the Yom Kippur War: Evaluations and Directions." All sermons cited in this essay can be found at the Lamm Heritage Website: www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

just a week earlier, R. Lamm had something else in mind. Citing a midrash which teaches that “so great is peace, that even in time of war, one needs peace” (*Bemidbar Rabba* 11:7), he posited that even partial peace is a desideratum. Expressing skepticism as to whether “the classical ideal of total and universal peace ever really existed,” he declared it “more of a myth than a reality.” Even in the midst of war, partial peace, such as minimizing casualties and stopping a third front from opening on the Jordanian border, was important too.

R. Lamm added in the name of R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook that unlike truth, which the Talmud calls the *seal* of God, peace is identified as the *name* of God. Why? Truth, like a seal, is absolute. By its very nature, it is all or nothing. But peace is more like writing a name: one letter, carefully composed, follows another and another until the name is complete. This is because “when it comes to peace, there we cannot expect all at once. There we must try for even a letter, even a vowel, even a syllable. We must strive even for peace in pieces.”

Having stressed the importance of any degree of physical peace, R. Lamm turned to a second level on which the partial attainment of peace is desirable: between Jews and fellow Jews.

The Quest for Unity

The quest for Jewish unity without uniformity dominated R. Lamm's thought and public addresses across numerous decades. Despite the euphoria and impressive show of Jewish unity that emerged in Israel in the wake of the Six Day War, he rued that this unity had collapsed, giving way to a series of divisive internecine debates on topics such as Who is a Jew, post-high school national service for young women (*sherut le'umi*), and job security for Sabbath-observant laborers.³

In 1973, the war naturally united Israelis in their desire to defeat a common enemy and in their collective anger at the perceived arrogance and consequent lack of preparation of the government and military establishment. Noting the new spirit of unity, he urged:

Between 1967 and Yom Kippur of 1973, it seemed at times that the State of Israel and the Jewish people would be rent apart almost irrevocably by various struggles, factionalisms, and animosities. It is a pity that it takes a war to bring us together. . . . This time we must insist that the relations between Jew and Jew remain supreme even when we are not threatened by the missiles of the enemy (“Peace in Pieces”).

3 See his sermon “Kulturkampf: The Religious Situation in Israel Today,” delivered January 29, 1972.

Unfortunately, R. Lamm was later compelled to acknowledge that his vision did not come to fruition. In one of his 1995 eulogies for Yitzhak Rabin, he was still bemoaning the fact that “the political culture of Israel is too loud, too intemperate.”⁴ And in his 1999 eulogy for Yosef Burg, a Mizrahi politician with whose moderate vision R. Lamm deeply identified, he confessed: “Truth to tell, in the end [Burg] did not prevail. Moderation took back seat to more radical and extremist views that began to dominate both his Religious Zionist political camp and our Orthodox community generally.”⁵ Still, during the Yom Kippur War and at other key junctures, R. Lamm seized the opportunity to trumpet the value of cooperation as loudly as he could.

Religious Inspiration

In “Peace in Pieces,” after discussing Jewish unity, R. Lamm turned to a third type of peace: that between God and His people. After the dazzling miracles of the Six Day War, Israel had squandered a golden opportunity to forge a long-lasting religious revival. This was a particularly painful loss for R. Lamm, who had spoken out repeatedly against the anti-religious sentiment that dominated Israel’s elite ruling class in the State’s early years.⁶ Yet while he was disappointed that the post-Six Day War spiritual rejuvenation was short-lived, he was not overly surprised. He observed:

What is quickly won, is quickly lost. A year after the 1967 war, there was hardly a souvenir left of the feeling of spiritual exaltation which so gripped the entire country. The religious renaissance simply never materialized.

This was consistent with his admonition to rabbis not to be overly impressed by adulation or big crowds. Instead, he urged, “pay more attention to the *kol demamah dakah* in the heart and mind of each Jew you will encounter . . . the ‘still, small voice’ is constant and enduring.”⁷

4 *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 226.

5 Available at the Lamm Heritage Archives under the “Eulogies, Tributes, and Special Addresses” tab.

6 See, for example, the following sermons: “Grandeur: A Jewish definition” (April 30, 1960); “Some First Impressions of a Visit in Israel” (January 16, 1971); “A Day of Good Tidings” (April 22, 1961); “Israel Independence Day: U.J.A. Appeal” (May 9, 1962); “Aspects of Creativity” (April 27, 1963); “Our Dependence Upon Israel’s Independence” (1966); “God, Man, and State” (April 23, 1966).

7 “Elijah as a Model for Rabbis,” *Hag ha-Semikha* Address (March 26, 2006), in *The Spirit of the Rabbinate* (RIETS, 2010), 90.

He held out hope that this time, things might proceed in a better direction:

Perhaps now it will be different. Most unfortunately, this is not going to be a mere 6-day war. It is going to be much more difficult. The casualties are already greater than they were in the entire 1967 war. But when it is over, and we will have prevailed (with the help of God), maybe then the slower pace of victory will produce a different attitude: not one of sudden seizures of religious insight which will, like a flash, illuminate and vanish quickly, but a slow understanding, a mature development, a profound realization that we are totally alone in the so-called "Family of Nations"; that in the long run, after we have relied upon each other as Jews, and after we have secured ourselves militarily and politically, ultimately *ein lanu le-hishaen ela al avinu she-ba-shamayim*, we have only God in Whom we can trust.

Concurrent with the hope that the new stirrings evoked in R. Lamm, he simultaneously expressed concern that many were now unnerved by the slow pace of progress in the war—just six days in! He noted that "because 1967 produced such a brilliant and quick victory, many of us are today depressed by the slower and more agonizing pace of events." Yet here too he insisted that we must take the long view. There is no reason or excuse for despair. If we did not disappear during the years of the Holocaust, we will certainly not do so now. We have not been restored to "a Most Favored Nation Status in the divine economy" for naught—and we dare not surrender that status after all we have achieved.

In a sermon delivered on January 5, 1974, titled "The Mood in Israel," delivered immediately following his aforementioned visit to Israel, R. Lamm noted that during his trip, he had indeed detected a new sense of pained spiritual exploration among secular Israelis. The changes did not add up to a religious renaissance, but they were meaningful nonetheless. Noting that the new religious stirrings were far more inchoate than those of 1967, when Hallel was recited by crying paratroopers at the Kotel, he explained:

I feel that what is now going on is, perhaps because it is slower and more halting, something that is more profound and lasting than the euphoria of six years ago. It is a deeper, sadder, larger view of the tragic dimension of life, and with it comes a search for meaning. And the search for meaning is already a religious and spiritual quest.

In "The Mood in Israel," he went on to offer a rich portrait of this new religious search. When he visited Israel in 1970, he felt a disconnect when he spoke with secular troops on religious themes. He had difficulty

relating to the soldiers, whom, he sensed, were anxious to be considered “normal,” more so than to connect to God and religion. But, he continued,

it is different today. I was asked to address troops, first in the Canal and then in Syria, but the “full high alert” prevented that. Instead I went to the Bikaah, on the Jordanian front, nearly half a kilometer from Jordanian soldiers. A hassidic band played and another speaker and I addressed the troops. Our themes were Israel as the *am ha-nivhar*, the Chosen People; *emuna* or faith; not wasting their special talents; questioning, searching. I found them not only receptive, but also participating. And in the dancing there was sheer ecstasy. Here were 300 soldiers, combat engineers, who took time out from laying mines and anti-tank traps, 80% or more officially “non-religious,” who sang and danced to such songs as *am Yisrael hai*, and other, new melodies both from America and Israel, with the abandon that comes from *deveikut*, or religious fervor. As one visitor pointed out, it was like a Hasidic wedding, without a bride and a groom.

Sadly, by his own later assessment, Israel did not do enough to actualize this new religious spirit, and to learn the proper lessons of 1973.⁸ But his call for religious renewal encapsulated well his preference for religious evolution to religious revolution.

Mourning and Rejoicing

On Sukkot 1973, as the war continued to rage and the extent of Israeli casualties had become widely known, a number of congregants approached R. Lamm with an elementary yet distressing question: “How can we be happy on this Simchat Torah?” This became the title of his Shemini Atzeret sermon on October 18, 1973.

In responding that we must rejoice despite our state of mourning and abject fear, R. Lamm discerned four elements in joy (*simha*). First, *simha* is a function of faith (*emuna*). He cites R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, who explains the phrase in Psalms 126, “*az yomeru va-goyim*,” “then it is said among the nations,” to mean that other nations only find faith *after* salvation has occurred, whereas the Jewish people maintain faith even when the distress

8 See his remarks in “Remembering the Six-Day War: Then and Now,” *TRADITION* 40:2 (2007), 7–13, especially on p. 9: “But that was not to be. Instead, we returned to our wonted ways. In 1973 and again in 2006 [the Second Lebanon War], when defeat and disaster stared us in the face, we should have understood that this was another God-given opportunity to turn to Heaven and pray that He break through His hiddenness and turn to us His ‘Shining Face’ so that we might rededicate ourselves to the spiritual heritage of our people—a heritage which includes confidence but not overconfidence, hope but not haughtiness—which justifies the hopes and sacrifices suffered on its behalf.”

remains acute and salvation tarries. We can rejoice precisely because we maintain our faith in times of crisis. Second, the Almighty's guiding hand has given us the gift of perspective. Many of us were rightly disturbed, he noted, by the unwarranted cockiness of the Israeli spokesmen in their initial reactions to the Yom Kippur attack. Despite this overconfidence, R. Lamm noted, the Israelis are not fools. He astutely noted: "Consider how wise is their perspective. They know that although the situation today is not as good as in 1967, it is better than in 1948! And it is a million times better than in 1940, or 1941, 1942, 1943 or 1944." We can rejoice because history has taught us to maintain perspective and not equate immense challenges with irreversible catastrophes.

Third, even in the happiest of times, *simha* necessarily issues from the complexities and ambiguities of life. Had this not been the case, we would have no right to rejoice again after the Holocaust. The Mishna in *Avot* (1:7) which teaches, "*al titya'esh min ha-pur'anut*," is best understood not only as a charge to refuse to assume the inevitability of suffering, but also as a call not to give up hope as a result of punishment. Whether or not we experience suffering is not up to us. But whether we respond with hope or despair is in our hands. Fourth and finally, *simha* itself is a vessel with which to battle evil. "If we give in now to depression and despair and gloom," R. Lamm declaimed, "we will hand a psychological and spiritual victory to Sadat and Faisal, to Malik and Fulbright. But when we dance on Simchat Torah, that is the greatest expression of Jewish defiance."

The common denominator among these themes, particularly the first three, is R. Lamm's recognition of the complexities of life generally and of mourning and celebration in particular. If our long history has taught us anything, it is that no joy can be absolute, just as mourning must pave the way toward the eventual possibility of rejoicing again. Whereas in the wake of the Six Day War he saw the need to stress the dangers of overindulging in messianic euphoria, he now found tragic occasion to emphasize that plunging ourselves into national mourning in the midst of a war is equally perilous.

Arrogance and Meekness

Even as the Yom Kippur War still raged, Israelis were gripped by an acute sense that the military and government had misled them with their bragadocio. This precipitated a national reckoning that shook the country to its core. Mirroring the psychological cloud that had enveloped Israel, in a lecture delivered in April 1974 and subsequently published under the title "The Yom Kippur War" in a book bearing the same name, R. Lamm warned that Israeli statehood had become synonymous with excessive pride. To be sure, the New Jew or *Homo Israeli* was needed to protect the State from her enemies, but it also posed grave dangers. Morally, militarism

was in danger of becoming a value in its own right, not just a means for protecting the country. Psychologically, Israelis' boundless faith in their leaders had been shattered. "Dying illusions are painful," R. Lamm wryly remarked, "and also enraging."⁹ Existentially, military unpreparedness had placed the nation in mortal danger.

At the same time, R. Lamm warned that a spirit of "sadness, depression, and pessimism" had supplanted the state's swagger. The pendulum had swung from one extreme to the other. But neither side was healthy, and none was consistent with the value of *emuna*, which both curbs excessive self-reliance and instills confidence that a positive outcome will ensue. As he put it: "Both arrogance and despair have the same provenance: a lack of faith."¹⁰

One year on, by *Kol Nidrei* night, 1974, the Israeli psyche had further deteriorated. Many described themselves as stricken by a profound sense of national despair. In his sermon that evening, entitled "Diffidence and Indifference," R. Lamm warned against the pitfalls of both Israeli arrogance leading up to the war and the new pervasive national insecurity, associating each attitude with the gravest sins of Jewish history. He cited an insight of R. Barukh HaLevi Epstein in his *Barukh she-Amar (Tefillot ha-Shana, Am Olam, 367)*, who relies on kabbalistic sources in establishing that there were two paradigmatic sins of the Jewish people: the brothers' sale of Joseph and the Golden Calf. The former, R. Lamm argued, was an outgrowth of fraternal arrogance. The temerity the brothers demonstrated in selling their brother into slavery evinced an appalling arrogance that imperiled not only their brother but their family. On the other hand, the sin of the Golden Calf was borne of the Jews' insecurity. Had they believed in their ability to worship God independently, the Jews would not have panicked at Moses's delayed descent and would not have felt desperate to manufacture an intermediary. Both indifference and diffidence, then, are archetypes of religious catastrophe. If the sale of Joseph represented Israelis' indifferent mindset leading into the Yom Kippur War, the Golden Calf was the model for the Jews' diffidence a year later. Both extremes, stressed R. Lamm, were liable to lead to disaster. A healthy medium was the only viable way forward.

Non-Messianic Religious Zionism

Above all, the Yom Kippur War was a vindication of R. Lamm's vision for a non-messianic brand of Religious Zionism.

In the wake of the Six Day War, and to a lesser degree as early as 1948, many Religious Zionists had begun to proclaim the arrival of *reshit*

9 Appeared in *The Yom Kippur War: Israel and the Jewish People*, ed. Moshe Davis (Arno Press, 1974), republished in *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, chap. 49, quote at 207.

10 *Ibid.*, 218.

tzemihat ge'ulatenu, the beginning of the messianic period of redemption. Along with so many others, R. Lamm was initially caught up in the excitement.¹¹ But soon after, he warned against the dangers of creating a practical program on the basis of messianic speculation or any attempt to read the political landscape through the prism of a predictive theological framework.¹² He cited Maimonides' admonition against calculating the end of days¹³ and was chagrined by rabbis who attempted to "play prophet" long after the cessation of the prophecy. He firmly disagreed, insisting that while the messianic impulse was psychologically and religiously understandable, it was also dangerous and wrong-headed in its practical application to contemporary affairs. Consistent with this standpoint, he took the unpopular step of omitting the phrase *reshit tzemihat ge'ulatenu* in the Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel on Shabbat morning.¹⁴ He insisted on taking a wait-and-see approach. We are not prophets, he reminded his congregants, and to confuse the sage for the prophet is foolish and dangerous. If Moses could only see God's back, as it were, can we dare claim that we see His face? That we can foretell His plans?

In part to guard against the excesses of this messianic outlook, and without questioning the core belief in the advent of the Messiah, R. Lamm developed an alternative theological framework for thinking about contemporary events, which we will describe in brief. Reflecting on the Holocaust and the return to Israel, he developed a theological framework in which God interacts with the world and the Jewish community in particular through three lenses: *hester panim* (God's hidden face), *nesiat panim* or *he'arat panim* (God's raised face or His illumination), and an intermediate category that he termed a "dream state" in which we are in a semi-waking state when we can once again dream of fully experiencing the divine,¹⁵ or simply "neither here nor there," the title of one of his classic sermons.¹⁶ The Holocaust is the exemplar par excellence of an era of *hester panim*. This framing enabled R. Lamm to avoid the theological challenge posed by those who claimed that God was absent during the Holocaust: He was present but, for reasons we cannot fathom, His presence was obscured.

11 "O Jerusalem" (June 15, 1967). In that initial sermon, delivered just days after the Six Day War, he spoke in explicitly messianic terms, declaring that "in our days those who are wise have sensed his approach, those who can hear with the inner ear have heard his footsteps, those who can see with the inner eye have perceived the first rays of his coming." But he changed his tune in the months and years to follow.

12 "The Religious Meaning of the Six Day War: A Symposium," *TRADITION* 10:1 (1968), 7–9.

13 *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2, based on *Sanhedrin* 97b.

14 See *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 244.

15 "The Curtain Rises" (October 6, 1967).

16 Delivered on March 9, 1968. For an extremely similar treatment, see also his Yom Yerushalayim "Address to College Youth" (May 26, 1968).

In the wake of the establishment of the State of Israel, he argued, we were blessed to emerge from that dark period of *hester panim*. But we were still far from a period of *nesiat panim*, which he described as a time when “Israel is dear to God and His providence does not leave us. He is accessible to our call and our prayer, and we are able with but normal human effort to experience His Presence in our lives. Our hearts possess the possibility of song.”¹⁷ We remained encircled by enemies, who declared war and sought to annihilate us on the very day the State was founded. The fledgling country’s economy was precarious at best. The dominant Israeli ethos and political leadership was rabidly anti-religious and the prospect of building a viable state was terrifying, even if exhilarating.

Even after the Six Day War, notwithstanding the open miracles and conquest of holy sites and large swaths of territory, matters were far from simple. The Israeli economy remained weak, international support for Israel was still tepid, and the Arabs were back at work plotting our extermination. Anyone asserting that the Arab-Israeli conflict had come to an end was delusional. Things were better, countless times over, but the period of *he’arat panim* had not yet dawned.

These categories carried practical ramifications. It was impossible to hold anyone responsible for non-observance of the *mitzvot* during the *hester panim* of periods such as the Shoah. Similarly, during times of *he’arat panim*, such as the Exodus and the Sinaitic Revelation, our free will had nearly been stripped from us and we lacked full-fledged freedom in choosing to observe the *mitzvot*. Caught in between these extremes are times when things are far from perfect but nor are matters completely dire. At the time of Purim, for example, God intervened on our behalf to stave off the threat of genocide, yet His presence remained obscured and we remained in exile. This, suggested R. Lamm, is the true meaning of the Talmudic tale that God held Mount Sinai over the Jewish people’s heads like a barrel. At Sinai, God’s presence was overwhelming. It was a time of *he’arat panim*. The Jews therefore had little choice but to accept the Torah at that time. But the Gemara concludes that Purim, when God’s presence was no longer clearly manifest, was the ideal time for the Jews to recommit themselves to Torah and *mitzvot*. Thus, the Jews’ renewed acceptance was truly meaningful and was viewed as a legitimate foundation for accepting the Torah. Nowadays too, R. Lamm contended, we are “neither here nor there.”

Against this backdrop, we can understand why the Yom Kippur War was so theologically significant for R. Lamm. To his mind, the debate as to whether we could declare with certitude that the post-Six Day War-era was a time of *he’arat panim*—and more to the point, whether we could

17 “The Curtain Rises,” *ibid.*

assert with confidence that any stage of the messianic era had definitively arrived—was by all reasonable accounts decisively resolved by the Yom Kippur War.

The setbacks of 1973 now become quite problematical for those who persisted in ascribing a Messianic dimension to the State. It . . . is reasonable to assume that if success proves the truth of a proposition—if 1948 and 1967 are the validations of the Messianic claims for the State of Israel—then failures prove the opposite.¹⁸

The error-riddled start to the war; the utter collapse of Israeli confidence in the government and military; and the long trauma of the nation as it emerged from the war, victorious but scarred, demonstrated beyond any shadow of a doubt that intellectual modesty and level-headed public policy decision-making were the orders of the day.

R. Lamm went further, arguing that belief in Israel, among both secular and religious Zionists, had transmuted into a form of “idolatry.” He approvingly noted Daniel Elazar’s observation that many diaspora Jews, having lost faith in God and Torah, had begun to turn the State of Israel into an idol. R. Lamm agreed: “We have contributed to this dangerous attitude which has made the State an end in itself.”¹⁹ Decrying “Israelolatry,” he sought to restore a basic commitment to God, Torah, and *mitzvot*, in which the State of Israel played an essential but more circumscribed role. In this conception of statehood, it would be legitimate and important to criticize Israel as appropriate, lest “the idol will be found to have clay feet.”²⁰

Of course, R. Lamm’s concerns did not dissuade those committed to a messianic reading of statehood from continuing to propound their views after the events of 1973. Far from it, noted R. Lamm; they were just required to introduce greater creativity and ingenuity into their conceptual schemes. Some asserted that the Yom Kippur War represented the apocalyptic struggle between Gog and Magog. They substantiated this claim by pointing to the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union, the two major international superpowers of the day, had lent their support to the Israeli and Arab sides, respectively. Others claimed that the events of 1973 provided additional evidence for the supernatural nature of the Israeli army’s powers. For these messianists, the fact that the I.D.F. succeeded despite the grim prospects, ironically provided even greater evidence for the ultimate invincibility of the Israeli military. A third group at least took the events seriously and subjected their messianic speculations to real critique. Instead of acknowledging that we cannot offer messianic

18 *Seventy Faces*, vol. 2, 214.

19 *Ibid.*, 208.

20 *Ibid.*, 209.

claims, they instead emphasized that the messianic era had dawned, but will only rise *kim'a kim'a*, a bit at a time, much like the rise of dawn.

But for R. Lamm, all these variations on messianic Religious Zionism, which were always wrong-headed, had now been proven entirely untenable. The very need for such casuistry when Jewish tradition provides categories that do not demand intellectual acrobatics or life-and-death decisions based on supernatural speculation, demonstrated that messianism was always a dangerous rabbit hole from which the Religious Zionist community would be hard-pressed to find its way back out.

R. LAMM CONCLUDED HIS JANUARY 5, 1974 SERMON with the following anecdote. Ephraim Holland, who shared his story directly with R. Lamm, emigrated with his young family from the Lower East Side and became an Israeli citizen. When war broke out on Yom Kippur, he was assigned to the reserves. Stationed near Kantara, along the Suez Canal, he was on the front lines during the first hours of war. The more enemy soldiers he and his brigade picked off with their machine guns, the more Egyptian troops swarmed over the canal: some 50,000–60,000 in total. In short order, most of his comrades were wounded or killed.

The commander ordered them to withdraw. Each was permitted to take one item. Most took an Uzi, but Ephraim took an Uzi and a *tallit*. Ephraim and 22 fellow soldiers became separated from the others. After trudging through the desert for a day-and-a-half, they found themselves caught in a firefight between Israeli and Egyptian troops. Both sides thought Ephraim's band of soldiers belonged to the enemy, and opened fire. The soldiers desperately tried to contact their comrades by transistor radio, but they could not establish a connection. At what seemed like the last moment, Ephraim unfurled his *tallit* and began to wave it in the direction of the Israeli troops. When they realized what it was, the Israelis got out of their tanks and motioned for the soldiers to come, and Ephraim and his comrades were saved.

R. Lamm conveyed this report as an inspirational story at the end of a sermon. But the anecdote's optimism also conveys something of his larger response to the Yom Kippur War. His messianic skepticism notwithstanding, he displayed fierce optimism in the face of the terrifying, grim scenario posed by the Yom Kippur War. He stressed the value of grasping for pieces of peace; saw opportunities for unity and sustained national religious growth; insisted that we experience joy even in the face of mourning and tragedy; denounced despair to be as pernicious as arrogance; and, precisely due to his non-messianic Zionism, refused to see the war as representing a radical shift in the divine economy that portended doom and gloom.

In the end, even as Israel experienced the Yom Kippur War as its Vietnam, R. Lamm was prepared to honor and mourn that suffering—so long as we did not permit our national suffering to lead us to surrender to despair.

The Yom Kippur War and the Religious Zionist Community in Israel

The effect of the Yom Kippur War on the Religious Zionist community, though it did result in a few outstanding works of literature and Jewish thought, was largely institutional and practical. As is well known, it was only after the Yom Kippur War that Gush Emunim (the original Religious Zionist settlement movement) was founded and that massive attempts at settling Judea and Samaria (especially the latter) were initiated. The question that needs clarification is why this was the case? If the “redemptive” ideology associated with the Rabbis Kook (*père et fils*) and the Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva became the regnant Religious Zionist ideology after the Six Day War and that enjoined settlement of the Greater Land of Israel, why did this attempt only begin in earnest seven years after 1967, following the 1973 Yom Kippur War? Was the Yom Kippur War indeed a factor, and what was it about the war that provoked this activity?

In this article we will briefly argue that the significance of the Yom Kippur War for the Religious Zionist community was intimately bound up with its significance for Israeli society as a whole. The Yom Kippur War was part of a general process which ended the political domination of the Labor Zionist movement, which had led the Zionist endeavor from 1932 through the establishment of the State and its first three decades. In the course of, and as a result of this process, alternative groups to the Labor movement began, in varying degrees, to offer their own visions of how Israeli society should be organized and what its goals should be. Such visions, implicitly and explicitly, contained responses to the outstanding dilemmas of the state such as what should be the fate of the territories conquered in the Six Day War and what should be the relations between Israel and various Arab populations and states including those residing in the West Bank. The settlement drive, which began in earnest in the spring of 1974, should be viewed as the beginnings of a first concrete attempt in the Religious Zionist sector to provide an overall vision for the broader Israeli society.

I will proceed along two tracks. The first will trace the institutionalization, routinization, and ultimate exhaustion of the Labor Zionist vision during the first several decades of Israel's establishment. I must emphasize that it was Labor Zionism's astonishing success that ultimately led to its own downfall. The initial debacles of the Yom Kippur war and the corruption investigations of the mid-1970s (led by then Attorney General Aharon Barak) merely delivered the *coup de grâce* which occurred in the 1977 election and the "government turnover" (*mahapakh*). I will discuss briefly how the debacle of the Yom Kippur war was experienced by the individual Religious Zionist soldier through Haim Sabato's war novel, *Adjusting Sights*, in its original Hebrew *Ti'um Kavvanot* (meaning both aligning the gunsights and one's inner orientation—the title is an ironic play on words).

The second track will trace developments in the Religious Zionist sector. I will recount briefly the sociological conditions for the formation of the drive to shape the Israeli State as a *Medinat ha-Torah* in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This was followed by the ideological crystallization of that drive around the romantic religious philosophy associated with R. Kook, Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, and the agenda of Greater Land of Israel following the Six Day War. Finally, I will describe how the Yom Kippur War led to an actual attempt to implement that religious philosophy as a concrete political program centered around settling *Eretz Yisrael ha-Shelema*. I will describe some of the central characteristics of that program: mainly that it was not conceived as a sectorial program, promoting the interests of the Religious Zionist sector alone. Rather it was borne out of a notion of fulfilling the inner "general will" of the entire Jewish people. This notion, accelerated in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, provided the legitimation for the Religious Zionists to attempt to enact this program and influence Israeli society as a whole.

The Labor Zionist movement which was hegemonic in the Jewish *Yishuv* and then in the State of Israel could boast extraordinary accomplishments. It fended off attacks from the irregular troops of the Palestinian population and six Arab armies. It absorbed an immigrant population numbering twice the amount of its original inhabitants, and it created the institutional structure of a modern state including educational and health systems, a modern military and universities, together with a growing economy.

Nevertheless, in accomplishing this, it went through transformational changes that eventually led to its alienation from large sectors of Israeli society. One can describe the overall process as one of institutionalization and routinization. During the pre-state period Labor Zionism resembled a charismatic movement dedicated to a revolutionary cause. During

this period it was characterized by close social relations between its political, cultural, economic and military elites. All were dedicated to the same cause and the occupational differences were subordinated to the common revolutionary vision. With the creation of the state this gradually changed. Israel erected modern bureaucracies and its incumbents, like other bureaucrats all over the world, became more focused upon their professional advancement than on any revolutionary vision.¹ This was reflected in a number of changes in Israeli institutions. The most dramatic was perhaps the 1951 decision by the Histadrut—the Labor Zionist state building labor federation—to cease paying salaries by the socialist principle of “each according to his needs,” but rather competitively in accordance with the market. Thus, while under the old system the janitor with 12 children earned more than the chairman of a Histadrut-owned company, after the change, the salary structure started to resemble those of other large corporations and organizations—those at the top earned many more times those at the bottom. This change dovetailed with the emergence of a Western style middle class, most notably by elites gaining control of public or state resources. This “privatization” fed into the growing Ashkenazic middle class which held managerial positions in the state, the public sector, or the Histadrut, and expressed itself in a lifestyle of private automobiles, trips abroad, university education, and the like.²

This change also became significant in regard to how social problems and developments were viewed and defined. The great immigration in the 1950s, especially from North Africa and the Middle East, was not viewed as a human wave to be welcomed and embraced as part of the national struggle. Rather, it was seen as a problem that was to be solved and as a manipulable resource that could be used to alleviate other problems.³ The new immigrants were directed, not entirely with their consent, to Israel's periphery, to stand as a human wall against Arab infiltrators and offered menial employment in Israel's new emerging industries. Again, this dovetailed with the modernization and industrialization of Israel's economy (funded by German reparations and Israel Bonds). In the course of this industrialization, veteran Kibbutz and Histadrut members became managers while the new immigrants (mostly but not exclusively from Sephardic lands) became low wage workers.⁴ This treatment of the

1 See S.N. Eisenstadt, *The Transformation of Israeli Society: An Essay in Interpretation* (Routledge, 1986).

2 Shulamit Carmi and Henry Rosenfeld, “The Appropriation of Public Funds and the State Made Middle Class” [Hebrew], *Mahbarot le-Mehkar u-le-Bikkoret* 2 (1979).

3 S.N. Eisenstadt, *The Transformation of Israeli Society: An Essay in Interpretation* (Routledge, 2019).

4 S. Swirsky, “Lo Nehashalim ela Menuhashalim,” *Mahbarot le-Mehkar u-le-Bikkoret* (1981).

immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East was justified by reference to stigmatic and stereotypical images of them as “primitive” and from the “third world.”⁵

Increasingly, the Labor Zionist elite became the object of resentment on the part of those immigrants. Starting in the early 1960s, we witness growing support among this population for the opposition Herut party headed by Menahem Begin.⁶ This resentment on the part of the immigrant population joined with the long-standing resentment of the religious population, which, though it was in “historic partnership” with the Labor parties, was excluded from full participation in the state-building project and in the elites. In general, the Labor Zionist movement came to be regarded as a “power elite” concerned primarily with its privileges, power, and prestige. As one observer put it: The new steel and glass Histadrut building, erected in the 1960s on Arlozoroff Street in Tel Aviv, radiated distance, power, and authority.

The removal of the Labor Party from ruling power was staved off by the glorious victory of the Six Day War. Once again, the Labor Zionist movement, and especially the younger military leaders associated with it such as Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin, seemed indispensable. The Yom Kippur War destroyed this indispensability. Golda Meir and the other leaders of the Labor Party were charged with the *mehdal*—the negligent failure which resulted in almost 10,000 Israelis killed or wounded. Zevulun Hammer, of the National Religious Party, reportedly said that if this what the Labor Party leaders can do (the “mess” of the Yom Kippur War), then we, the religious Zionists, can do equally well.

The feeling of unpreparedness and inadequacy of Israeli forces going in to the war was captured by very potent symbols in Haim Sabato’s war novel, *Ti’um Kavvanot*. First, it is captured by the central metaphor alluded to in the title: the sight of the narrator’s tank cannon needed adjustment. Thus, the Israeli tank crews were shooting without knowing what they were aiming at. This symbol is reinforced by the fact that the narrator-protagonist goes into battle, as he constantly reminds us, with an Uzi submachine gun without a strap. This seemingly minor detail renders the weapon much less effective, because one has to concentrate on holding it as it recoils instead of just aiming and firing. These details are metonyms for the entire Israeli army—it was not prepared, neither

5 Swirsky, “*Lo Nechashalim*”; Y. Shenhav, “*Ha-Yehudim ha-Aravim: Le’umi’ut*,” *Dat ve-Ethniut* (Am Oved, 2002); E. Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Point of View of its Jewish Victims,” *Social Text* 19–20 (1988), 1–35.

6 Hannah Herzog, “Is There in Fact Political Ethnicity?” [Hebrew], *Megamot* 28 (1984); Shlomo Fischer, “Two Patterns of Modernization: On the Analysis of the Ethnic Issue in Israel,” *Israel Studies Review* 31:1 (2016), 66–85.

physically or mentally. The equipment was not where it was supposed to be, nor was it maintained. The Israeli troops being thrown into battle had no idea of the enemy's intentions or capabilities. This is brought home by the fact, also repeated and emphasized throughout the novel, that as the narrator reaches the staging area in the Golan Heights, he finds Syrian commandos disembarking from a helicopter a few yards away. Through these potent symbols (immediately meaningful to anyone who has served in the IDF), reiterated throughout the narrative, the narrator conveys the experience of the chaos, unpreparedness, and inadequacy of the opening days of the fighting. It is in these degrading circumstances that the central figure of "Dov" (based upon the real life character of Dov Indig, a much admired *hesder* student at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh) is killed.⁷

It was in this desperate crucible that the resolve was forged to try and implement in practical concrete terms the Religious Zionist vision of the State, as an alternative to the dominant but failed Labor Zionist leadership.

Greater Israel and the Implementation of the Religious Zionist Vision

When we speak of "the Religious Zionist vision" what exactly do we mean? Have there not been many Religious Zionist visions? Are we talking about a vision or a practical policy program? In the context in which I am speaking, it refers to specific policies, institutions, and practical steps, but these are rooted in a specific religious philosophy, which during the 1960s and '70s became the mainstream of Israeli Religious Zionism. I am referring, of course, to the ideology rooted in the religious philosophy of R. Kook that was associated with the Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva and informed much of the settlement activity of Gush Emunim starting in the 1970s through the present day. In this section, I address the question of what was it in the Yom Kippur War, from the point of view of Religious Zionist history and experience, that brought the community to focus on settlement activism in the war's aftermath.

This mainstream "Kookist" ideology is to a certain extent rooted in the identity dilemmas of Religious Zionism. Religious Zionists identify with both Zionism as a modern national movement and with traditional or Orthodox practice. The dilemma arises because modern nationalism, including Jewish nationalism or Zionism tends to want to replace religion as the organizing principle of social life. It generally does not to abolish religion but it does want to subordinate it to its frameworks and goals.

7 I had personal acquaintance with Dov "Tibor" Indig, having studied with him at Kerem B'Yavneh.

Those groups that carried halakha as the organizing principle of Jewish life can react to the challenge of modern Jewish nationalism in one of the following ways:

- One can oppose and reject modern Jewish nationalism.
- One can assign to it a limited instrumental meaning and thereby attempt to enable it to coexist with traditional Judaism.
- One can attempt to effect an integration and unification of religion and modern nationalism.⁸

Agudat Yisrael and the Hasidic and Hungarian groups adopted the first approach—that of opposition and rejection. Religious Zionism, though, from the time that R. Jacob Reines founded the Mizrahi movement in 1902, adopted a dual or bifurcated approach: on the institutional and political-pragmatic level, Religious Zionism acted as if Zionism only had limited instrumental meaning—founding a Jewish state is necessary to provide a haven for persecuted Jews. On the theoretical and symbolic level, Religious Zionists strove toward the total unification of religion and nationalism or the religious and national frameworks of collective identity.

The encompassing symbol of this tendency toward the ideological unification of Jewish nationalism and Jewish religion is the notion of the “Torah Regime” (*Mishtar ha-Torah*) or the “Torah State” (*Medinat ha-Torah*).⁹ This concept includes two separate, yet connected, ideas. The first is that religious value and fulfillment can be realized in the “secular” or mundane realms of politics, settlement, economic production, cultural production, and the military. In other words, in realms outside of the narrow sacramental-religious arena of prayer, Torah study, religious ritual, and interpersonal ethics. The second idea is that these realms have to be ordered according to some religious vision, principle, or regulations. The various institutional arenas of life—political, economic, cultural, military, etc.—were to be brought within an overall religious meaning and regulative system.

This tendency toward bifurcation of the inner symbolic and ideological realm, on one side, and the realm of pragmatic politics on the other, was structural and rooted in the conditions within which the Religious Zionist frameworks functioned in the first half of the twentieth century.

- 8 It should be stressed that this is not a return to the traditional conflation of religion and peoplehood (though its proponents sometimes want to present it as such) but an attempt to integrate religion with the ideas of modern nationalism and its institutional forms such as the modern nation-state.
- 9 Like the Religious Zionists themselves, I shall be using the two terms interchangeably throughout this section.

The Religious Zionists always struggled on two fronts—against the anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox (Haredim) and against the secular Zionists. On their right, they had to constantly defend themselves against charges that they had abandoned the traditional normative framework and the framework of collective identity. From the left, because of their religious traditionalism, they were constantly suspected of insufficient commitment to the project of a modern nation-state and threatened with exclusion from this project. It is precisely against the Haredi charges that R. Reines in his public apologetic writings claims that Judaism and Zionism exist on separate planes; that Zionism is merely a political program for the alleviation of Jewish suffering.¹⁰

On the other side, if the Religious Zionists were to express their notion of the integration of the Jewish religious and Jewish nationalist frameworks in concrete policy terms, this would end their ability to cooperate with the secular Zionists and exclude them from participation, power and influence, and from the ruling coalition.¹¹ Instead, on the political plane, they restricted themselves, from 1902 to the mid-1960s, to looking after the material and religious interests of their constituents (kosher food in the IDF, funding for synagogues, subsidies for religious *kibbutzim*, etc.). Nevertheless, slowly and gradually, Religious Zionism began to depart from the dualist paradigm.

The Religious Zionist community began in practice to depart from the dualist paradigm in the 1920s and started to implement the Torah regime as a practical program starting in the 1920s and 1930s. This was undertaken by the worker's sector of the community organized in the Mizrahi Workers Party (HaPoel HaMizrachi) and the Religious Kibbutz Federation (HaKibbutz HaDatit), many of whom were oriented toward founding cooperative agricultural settlements.¹²

These workers represented an attempt to penetrate the vanguard sectors of the national project, that is, the secular Labor Zionist elites organized in the Kibbutz Movements and the Histadrut Labor Federation. Due to their participation in those frameworks of the nation-building project, they were able to see themselves, more than other Religious Zionist Jews in *Eretz Yisrael*, as full members of the incipient modern Zionist nation-state. As a result, the sense of national membership overwhelmed the ability of HaPoel HaMizrachi to maintain it as one of two

10 Yitzchak Yaakov Reines, *Or Hadash mi-Tzion* (1946); and Dov Schwartz, *Me-Reshit ha-Tzemiha le-Hagshama*," in *Ha-Tzionut ha-Datit: Idan ha-Temurot*, ed. A. Cohen and Y. Harel (2004), 29–30.

11 Asher Cohen, *Ha-Talit ve-ha-Degel: Ha-Tzionut ha-Datit ve-Hazon Medinat ha-Torah bi-Yimei Reshit ha-Medina* (Yad Ben Tzvi, 1998), 113–116.

12 Schwartz, "Me-Reshit ha-Tzemiha le-Hagshama," 65ff.

heterogeneous components of its identity. What its members strove to do, then, was to unify it with the religious component. This they did by extending religious meaning and value to the (secular) spheres of nationalist activity: settlement, agriculture, economic production, cultural activity, and eventually military service. Of course, this attempt was very similar to the ideology and vision of *Mishtar* or *Medinat ha-Torah*, which had been promulgated by Religious Zionist and Mizrahi leaders since R. Reines. The contribution of HaPoel HaMizrachi was that they tied this vision to the direct practical and institutional conditions of the day-to-day existence of their members, moving it beyond the realm of mere ideology and dreams. Thus, in the 1920s and 1930s, figures in HaPoel HaMizrachi developed a theology of labor, attempting to imbue work in construction and in agriculture with religious meaning and value. The religious Kibbutz Movement went a step further and attempted to set up a utopian religious community, the religious kibbutz. Here, the expansion of religion was carried out in the areas of the organization of economic production and communal institutions.¹³

The Embryonic Emergence of Two Trends in the Torah Regime

This attempt to tie the ideal of the Torah Regime—both in the sense of attributing religious value to the secular spheres of nationalist activity and to regulate these secular spheres according to religious visions—to concrete institutional and behavioral reality, gave rise to two different trends and orientations within HaPoel Hamizrachi, which in varying ways, are with us until this very day.

The first trend, I shall call the “humanist” or liberal-nationalist approach, which assumes that national or moral-humanist values can be translated into equivalent religious values.¹⁴ Thus, defending Jewish settlements or the Jewish state can be viewed as a national value, and it can be translated into the mitzva of concern for the well-being of the Jewish People. Similarly, making a law that requires an employer to pay his workers within a reasonable amount of time can be viewed as achieving the “secular” value of fairness, and it can be translated as fulfilling the prohibition of delaying wages (Leviticus 19:13).

The second trend is the expressivist-romantic approach associated with R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook. This does not assume that any simple equivalency could be found between the secular spheres and the

13 Aryei Fishman, *Judaism and Modernization on the Religious Kibbutz* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

14 Cf. Shlomo Aviner, “Radicalism and Liberalism in the National Religious Camp” [Hebrew], *Amudim* (1979).

religious ones. On the contrary, the “secular” and the “religious” are viewed as antithetical. The “secular” (as we have seen all along) refers to the realms of politics, settlement, economic production, and cultural revival that constitute the nationalist project. The antithesis of this is the life of “religion,” which consists of withdrawal from the worldly realms and singular devotion to Torah study, prayer, and the performance of the ritual *mitzvot*. Both of these parts, the “secular” and the “life of religion” are conceived of as fragments, which do not represent the whole ideal life. That whole ideal life is achieved when both parts are dialectically transcended in a higher synthesis, that is, when secular national life as a whole becomes suffused with religious idealism and thus transformed.¹⁵

The End of Dualism and the Expansion of Religion as a Practical Political Program

In the 1950s and 1960s (prior to the Six Day War), the generation that was socialized in the framework of the State of Israel (e.g., Zevulun Hammer, Micha Yinon), organized in the Young Guard of the National Religious Party and started to aim for the extension of the idea of the Torah Regime from the level of the kibbutz and moshav to the national level of the state. They were able to do this since their status as Jewish citizens guaranteed them unconditional membership in the national and state political collective and were no longer afraid of being excluded. In the journal of these young activists (*Alei Mishmeret*), they cast about for how to precisely formulate and implement in practical policy terms a Torah state, utilizing ideas from both the liberal-nationalist and expressivist-romantic approaches.

The Six Day War and the conquest of the Greater Land of Israel solved their quest. The settlement and annexation of the West Bank, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and Northern Sinai essentially constituted the content of a program applying religious ideals to national life. It provided the ideology of the Torah Regime with a coherent, detailed, and concrete practical program. In so doing it ushered in an ultimate unification of religious and national identities.

The orientation of settling and incorporating the Greater Land of Israel was carried by the expressivist-romantic orientation. According to this approach, the Land of Israel is not conceived as “dead” matter which can be endlessly subdivided. It is a unified, living “Whole,” with a

15 The most famous works of R. Kook expressing this approach are *Ma'amar ha-Dor Adar ha-Yakar ve-lkvei ha-Tzon* (Mossad HaRav Kook, 1967), *Arpilei Tohar (Wisps of Purity)* (R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook Institute, 1983; first published 1914). See Sarah Strassberg-Dayana, *Yahid, Uma ve-Enoshut: Tefisat ha-Adam be-Mishnotayhem shel A.D. Gordon ve-ha-Rav Kook* (HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, 1995), and Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2014).

conceptual or spiritual essence.¹⁶ One cannot have half of *Eretz Yisrael* any more than one can be half pregnant or half dead.

The People of Israel and the Land of Israel are thus organic Wholes with an affinity for one another. For national life to realize full religious meaning, it must take place within the context of *Eretz Yisrael* as a whole, corporate, organic entity. The expressivist-romantic ideology of the Greater Land of Israel made *Eretz Yisrael* into a categorical, non-negotiable, and non-fungible demand. This approach toward *Eretz Yisrael*, which was adopted by no other stream in Israel, turned the Religious Zionists into an autonomous political actor.

R. Kook's rarefied religious teaching achieved a form of hegemony in the Religious Zionist community precisely because of its association and mutual embeddedness with the agenda to settle and incorporate the Greater Land of Israel. Together with the demand for the land itself, the Religious Zionist community also tended to adopt the stream that "carried" it. Moreover, the territorial agenda became a symbol, both as metaphor and metonym, for an entire religious outlook and way of life based on the expressivist religious nationalism of R. Kook.

What gave R. Tzvi Yehuda and Merkaz HaRav their unique importance and premier position in the effort to settle and incorporate the Greater Land of Israel is that he succeeded in embedding this agenda in an encompassing religious vision that included reconfiguring Israel as a Torah Regime. In this vision, ultimate and eschatological religious ideals would manifest within and through concrete material, political, and social worlds, effected through the realms of state policy and politics, economic development, and military doctrine and deployment. R. Tzvi Yehuda was wont to say that "the politics of the Collectivity of Israel (*klal Yisrael*) is holy" and "the politics of the Collectivity of Israel is Torah." His equivalent phrase for "Israeli politics" was "divine politics."¹⁷ Realization of the ultimate religious ideals in the mundane spheres constituted the higher synthesis of the profane and the holy (*kodesh ve-hol*) that lies at the heart of R. Kook's expressivist religious philosophy. By linking this religious philosophy to a concrete political program, R. Tzvi Yehuda imbued the

16 "We have always been educated thus, that the Land of Israel is not a matter of territory. The Land of Israel is a matter of [spiritual] depth, of soulful content, which is indeed related in an essential and necessary manner with the territory of the Land of Israel"—R. Eliezer Waldman, Rosh Yeshiva in Hebron, quoted in Dov Schwartz, *Eretz ha-Mamashut ve-ha-Dimyon: Ma'amada shel Eretz Yisrael be-Hagut ha-Tzionit Datit* (Am Oved, 1997), 123.

17 The word *Yisraeli* (in Kookist usage) also carries a special connotation. It refers to the "whole religious life" in which the this-worldly spheres of politics, society, etc., reflect divine ideals and are regulated by them.

political program with cosmic meaning, while instilling practical, material significance in the religious philosophy.

In this comprehensive vision, the Land of Israel has a dual relation to the Torah and the Torah Regime. First, it constitutes an implementation and realization of the Torah. The Torah would be fully realized through returning to the Land of Israel and settling it through building social and political institutions in the light of the Torah. The Land of Israel is thus a component in the overall vision of the Torah Regime. Second, *Eretz Yisrael* constitutes a condition for the realization of the Torah Regime as the necessary material substratum for national, political, social, and economic life and institutions. Placing the Torah in these concrete settings enables its full realization, infusing and informing mundane social, political, and economic arrangements with religious ideals and values. However, it must be stressed that *Eretz Yisrael* was not a mere means to an end. Concrete, material *Eretz Yisrael* is the embodiment of an ideational phenomenon—the realization of the divine ideals in the mundane world. Hence it is “bound in an essential way to the life of the nation.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, after the Six Day War the Religious Zionists continued to accept the leadership of Labor Zionism in practice. The two settlement enterprises that Religious Zionists undertook after the War, Kfar Etzion and Kiryat Arba, were undertaken under Labor auspices. Levi Eshkol himself approved of the settlement of Kfar Etzion (“*Kinderlach*, go up”) and leading Labor movement figures such as Yigal Alon were involved in setting up both communities (including arranging for weapons to be delivered to the settlers). In order to understand the impact of the Yom Kippur War in changing this situation and especially how the Religious Zionists formulated the war’s emotional and existential impact, we need to understand more of the expressivist-romantic theological approach that R. Kook and his school represented. This religious philosophy provided the language and the concepts with which the impact of the War was interpreted and formulated.

The roots of R. Kook’s thought are in the Kabbalah of R. Isaac Luria. Luria outlined a dialectical myth of Divine disintegration and higher reintegration. R. Kook interpreted this myth and applied it to history—to the history of humankind and the cosmos and especially to the redemptive history of the Jewish People. One of the most central tropes of the Lurianic myth is that of the Divine “contraction” or “withdrawal.” At the very beginning of creation, according to Luria, God “withdraws” from a central point in His existence leaving an “empty space” with only a divine “residue” within it. This residue is the ontological root of the profane

18 R. Kook, *Orot* (1963), 9.

material world. Responding to the crisis in His existence, God emanates divine light into the residue (the profane material world), engaging with it and (using explicit sexual imagery) “giving birth” to new cosmos. Within this process, the material world becomes refined and elevated, while the spiritual divine light achieves new energy and breadth. At the end of this process, the Divine achieves a higher level of perfection than initially.

R. Kook’s basic metaphysical scheme is that of dialectic: a divine or spiritual entity (thesis) engenders its negation or disintegration (antithesis), which is then followed by a confrontation or engagement between the thesis and antithesis, which results in a higher synthesis that is more perfect than its predecessors. He applies this scheme to multiple phenomena. These range from atheism to biblical criticism (and even to sports). Above all, he applies it to Jewish nationalism. In his understanding, traditional Jewish religion with its otherworldliness and political passivity is negated by secular nationalism, which to establish its political activism and self-reliance has to be actually hostile toward religion. In the end, the confrontation between the two will generate a higher synthesis of religiously inspired nationalism. In this synthesis, religion is to achieve a life-affirming energy and nationalism will achieve a moral and spiritual quality.

This higher synthesis is affected by two complementary processes: the first is that the divine ideals devolve themselves downwards and clothe themselves in the material world. Second, the material world itself has an inner will to return to its ultimate source in God. Both of these movements depend upon man’s thought, meditation, and action. R. Kook describes two complementary approaches through which humans bring about the synthesis of the divine and the material. In the first, top-down, approach, the spiritual master participates in intuitive or mystical consciousness with the divine light or life that clothes itself in the finite, material world, thus bringing the world into a dynamic of actively perfecting itself. In the second, bottom-up, approach, human beings identify with the inner will of material concrete entities (including their own inner will) to recognize themselves as being of God; to demonstrate their divine nature and their participation in the divine All. To realize their true divine nature, human beings in this path engage in ethical, political, social, and cultural ordering to construct the world according to the divine ideals of justice, peace, and integrity. To a large extent, these two paths work in tandem. However, there is also a latent tension between the first approach that emphasizes the realization of God’s action and the second one that stresses the fulfillment of the will of finite, material (especially human) entities.

Like the thought of Hegel, Herder, Goethe, and Schelling, the notion of expression and related notions such as authenticity and alienation have a key role in R. Kook’s thought. This is so in terms of both aspects of the

concept utilized by early nineteenth-century thinkers: first, all thought is expressed in a material medium; it is clothed in words that are composed by sounds and letters, or in paint, stone, or even customs, mores and social institutions. Second, all *thinking* is carried out by a material living being, that is a being with drives and impulses and that is part of nature. In such a being, this thinking must be recovered by a process of progressive self-clarification. The first aspect is paralleled in R. Kook's philosophy by God's movement to embody his ideals in the external material world. Second, R. Kook's idea that living, material entities—individual human beings, the Jewish people, the human species itself, and all the cosmos—have an inner spiritual will to realize themselves as divine and return to God, parallels the expressivist idea that all *thinking* is carried out by a material living being, that is, a being with natural, physical drives and impulses. Hence, the realization of the will or of thinking must be *achieved*.

The recovery of the inner, authentic will to return to one's source in God is to occur on both the collective and individual planes. As we shall see next, on the collective plane one achieves this by identifying with the General Will (*volonté général* in the sense of the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau) of the Jewish nation, humankind, and the cosmos. On the individual plane, one attains this by acting freely in accord with the dictates of natural morality; that is, morality that does not derive from some external source or dictates, but rather arises spontaneously within the conscience or mind of the individual.

However, R. Kook did not have a liberal vision of the autonomous self. On the contrary, he always referred to the atomistic liberal individual in non-complimentary ways. Rather, one realizes one's authentic, true self by attaching oneself, or becoming an extension of, cosmic super-individual entities such as the organic collectivity of the Jewish people, the Divine-cosmic benevolence coursing through the universe, and the Torah and the commandments, not by being an autonomous, atomistic liberal individual.

Out of this general metaphysical understanding, R. Kook and his school formulated two basic theological-political concepts: the General Will (in a sense very close to that of Rousseau's) and the Divine State (which is close to Hegel's concept of the state and its dialectical evolution).

The General Will concept is rooted in the bottom-up approach to higher synthesis of the Divine and the material world that I previously described. One important path toward uncovering one's inner authentic will to return to God is by identifying with the "universal generalness" or the General Will of the collective-cosmic entities outside of him: the Jewish People, Humankind, and the cosmos. The aim of this effort is for every particular being to recognize and experience itself as belonging to

the all-embracing, all-inclusive “All” and to recognize the connection of that with God. As every particular being overcomes its own particularity and partialness and identifies with the universal, it reveals its own inner will, which is to identify with the universal and with God. Again, this concept is very similar to Rousseau’s concept of the *volonté général* in which the citizen recovers his own true, authentic will by identifying with the generality of the body politic.

The identification with the universal generalness of the Jewish nation and of humankind must manifest itself in action in the world. On the Jewish national level, it involves participation in the national renaissance and on the universal level in the contribution to the realization of the good, the moral, and beautiful through law, mores, social institutions, literature, philosophy, and art.

The decisive political move regarding this concept came when R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook, disciple, redactor, and editor of his father’s writings, applied it to the annexation and settlement of the Greater Land of Israel in September 1967, following the Six Day War. Building upon an earlier ruling concerning the Zionist movement itself, he argued that since, empirically, people from all walks of life and all sectors supported the retention, settlement, and incorporation of the Greater Land of Israel, this was not a mere sectorial interest of the Religious Zionist community, but rather the *General Will* of the entire Jewish people. At that time, R. Tzvi Yehuda’s claim was quite plausible. Over the summer of 1967, right after the war, declarations in support of the incorporation of the Greater Land of Israel were issued by sections of the Labor Zionist movement (“The Movement for the Greater Land of Israel”), by their right-wing opponents, the Herut Party, and by many leading intellectuals, artists, and writers (S.Y. Agnon, Naomi Shemer, Moshe Shamir, among them). In other words, the inner metaphysical will of the Jewish People was held to be expressing itself in regard to an empirical, political issue: the retention of territories conquered in war (and the possibility of peace negotiations with the Arabs).

The other fundamental concept is that of the Divine State. While this concept is the necessary complement to the concept of the general will, it achieved supreme public importance only in the 1980s and subsequent decades and was of less public importance and attention in the period immediately following the Yom Kippur War.

Recovery of the Inner Authentic Self and Will of the Jewish People

The experience of the Yom Kippur war was one of initial setbacks, defeats, then falling back, and finding inner resources and one’s authentic self and will. This process is described extensively and beautifully in the most

significant theological work to come out of the Yom Kippur War—*Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim* by R. Yehuda Amital. As Hanan Porat, R. Yaakov Medan, and others of the first generation of students of Yeshivat Har Etzion testify,¹⁹ R. Amital was a significant figure among those who purveyed a “redemptive” reading of the creation of the State of Israel and the Six Day War in the 1970s. Even though the text of *Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim* was first presented as a talk within the Yeshiva, its existence as a foundational text seems to have been known in wider yeshiva circles.²⁰

A central theme of this work is the recovery on the part of *Am Yisrael* of its authentic self. As the world abandons and turns on Israel (because of oil), Israel turns inward and seeks its authentic self and true identity—through such search and recovery it will come to God and to redemption.²¹ *Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim* was so significant because it resonated with and gave form to the inner experiences of the young Religious Zionists who were at the forefront of the fighting. In its own way, it gave expression to the modern ideals of authenticity and self-realization. Similar sentiments were expressed by writers in Merkaz HaRav such as R. Yehoshua Tzukerman. The Yom Kippur War brought to the fore hidden resources from the depths of the self, including those of true self-identity and will. The clash with the Arab armies brings out the true nature of the Jewish people, which of course necessarily leads to redemption.²²

Within this general process of self-clarification and recovery of one's authentic self (collectively and individually), the identification with the national collective began to play a role. It was specifically through the process of mobilization and the self-enlistment on behalf of the nation

19 “Hanan Porat Eulogizes Rav Amital” (<https://youtu.be/g4aRV43MAsg>); R. Yaakov Medan, “The Figure and Thought of R. Amital” (https://youtu.be/G51O3p_CrgI).

20 I became aware of the work while in New York in the Fall of 1973 even though I had not studied in Yeshivat Har Etzion. See also the quote from R. Drukman, quoted in Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz, *Mi-Mitzi'ut le-Safa: Ha-Tzionut ha-Datit ve-Milhemet Yom ha-Kippurim* (Carmel, 2023), 42, which considered the text “important” and seems to imply that it was well-known. In general, Sagi and Schwartz, following earlier research, consider it to be “an expression of the characteristic reaction of the Religious Zionist public to the Yom Kippur War” and as contributing to the theological basis for Gush Emunim (50–51). This text fell into neglect in the 1980s as R. Amital came to be considered a “heretic” from an Orthodox Kookist point of view. Because of this shift in outlook, *Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim* also ceased to represent R. Amital's deepest commitments. It became neglected both by the Kookists in Merkaz HaRav, who initially applauded it, and by R. Amital himself and Yeshivat Har Etzion. See Medan, *op. cit.*, for an analysis of the trajectory of R. Amital's thought and its division into “three editions.”

21 Sagi and Schwartz, *Mi-Mitzeit le-Safa* 49–51. See the chapter from *Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim* translated and published in this issue of *TRADITION*.

22 R. Yehoshua Tzukerman, “The Yom Kippur War” [Hebrew], in D. Ginzburg, *Be-Ikvot Milhemet Yom ha-Kippurim: Pirkei Hagut, Halakha u-Mehkar* (1974).

in battle that the authentic self was recovered. The experience of Religious Zionist soldiers here is continuous with the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and, in a different vein, Ernst Junger, who described the recovery of the authentic self through violence and war. This process of the recovery of the authentic self involved identification with the general will, that is, with the desire to overcome one's individual or even sectorial particularity and identify with the collective aims of the general national collective. Furthermore, the Religious Zionists understood that the general will emerged empirically, not only in the fighting on behalf of the State and People of Israel, but also in the aftermath of the war in the opposition to the Separation of Forces Agreements brokered by Secretary of State Kissinger. The massive demonstrations against the agreements that included participants from all walks of life and lifestyles—secular kibbutzniks as well as yeshiva students, secular culture celebrities alongside rabbis—signaled to the Religious Zionists that the opposition to the Agreements and the withdrawal from parts of *Eretz Yisrael* were not sectorial matters but rather reflections of the general will of the entire People of Israel. This general will, thus unleashed, included not only self-enlistment on behalf of the nation in war, but according to Religious Zionist understanding, political activity on behalf of *Am Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael*. Thus, it expressed the inner, metaphysical will of the striving of the collectivity of Israel for *Eretz Yisrael*, redemption, and God. This understanding provided the energy for the continued settlement attempts in the aftermath of the War.

This notion that the collectivity of Israel was recovering its inner authentic general will in the struggle for the Greater Land of Israel affected the patterns of political action and settlement. It led to attempts to establish joint political and settlement ventures with secularists, first in the aftermath of Yom Kippur and until this very day. (The short-lived New Right Party founded by Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked in 2019 as a joint religious-secular party can be considered a continuation of this tradition.) Moshav Keshet in the Golan Heights was the first attempt to found a deliberately joint religious-secular settlement though it did not persevere for very long as a mixed settlement. As we shall see, its initial mixed religious-secular character was held to express that it was the product of the general will of the Jewish People.

Keshet was established in the spring of 1974 as part of the campaign against the Separation of Forces Agreement between Israel and Syria that was being negotiated by Kissinger. The settlement was initiated by Yehuda Harel of the secular United Kibbutz Movement and it was conceived of, at the start, as a mixed settlement of Orthodox and secular-nationalist

Jews. The religious component was made up of activists from Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav. We can get a sense of the centrality and importance of this notion of the general will, which is not only a metaphysical notion but a political reality, in Kookist culture and especially in the struggle for the Greater Land of Israel from the first numbers of the Keshet newsletter. The residents, who lived in the Golan Heights along the armistice line with Syria, started to publish their internal newsletter very soon after they established their settlement in the heady days of the spring of 1974. As Gideon Aran points out, the Keshet newsletter is a faithful window to the inner world of the Kookist activists.²³ It was the first Kookist settlement of the 1970s and serves as prelude to the settlements of Gush Emunim. In the early pages of the newsletter (written by hand on stencil paper and mimeographed), we find the voice of leading personalities from the school of R. Kook such as R. Tzvi Thau and R. Haim Drukman, as well as of rank and file settlers.

On the second page of the first issue, after an epigraph by R. Yaakov Moshe Charlap (Rosh Yeshiva of Merkaz HaRav, 1935–1954), we find an opening, exhortatory article by Chana Thau, which frames the ideological orientation of the publication and indeed of the settlement project itself. Chana Thau (1940–2005) was the first wife of R. Tzvi Thau, R. Tzvi Yehuda's leading disciple. Her participation in, and dedicated efforts to establishing the settlement were part of Kookist mythology. Of herself and the Keshet settlers she writes:

We strengthen the hearts of Israel [or Jewry], we are the true public agents who reveal and execute the internal, profound, and wholesome will of Israel. We also influence the realization of divine salvation which expects to influence from above the entire human awakening below.²⁴

This short paragraph is an extremely rich theological statement. Chana Thau asserts that the settlers are carrying out the general will of Israel, and that that is what confers legitimacy on their action. They are Israel's true representatives. Her rhetoric points to the inner, objective metaphysical general will, which is articulated in the settler's actions that find expression on the political-practical plane.²⁵ Her concise but densely packed paragraph was unpacked by Eli Horowitz's long *derasha* on the

23 Gideon Aran, *Me-Tzionut Datit le-Dat Tzionit: Shoreshei Gush Emunim ve-Tarbut* (Doctoral Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1987).

24 *Keshet ba-Golan* 1 (June 1974), 2.

25 The second sentence points to God's salvation, the actualization of which the general will helps to theurgically realize.

Shavuot holiday in the same issue. He talks about Israel's general will in its highest metaphysical terms:

The collectivity of Israel [*Ecclesia Israel*] aspires to mend the world in its entirety . . . the profundity of desire of the community of Israel in all of its life-movements . . . is perfecting the world in the kingdom of God.²⁶

Yet in the same fashion as Chana Thau, he ties this objective, metaphysical will to its manifestation in the Keshet enterprise. Other offerings in this issue reflect upon the same themes including a short but theologically laden prose poem and another article. These describe the ascension of the individual from his private concerns to the general orientation of the collective Whole. They also point to the double movement (whose source is in the writings of R. Kook and in R. Tzvi Yehuda)—how each and every individual becomes tied to the general-universal collective and how the contribution of each individual strengthens the collective and its general will, as in R. Tzvi Yehuda's broadsheet "*Lo Taguru*" (which forbade returning any part of *Eretz Yisrael*). The collective is general-universal precisely because it includes all sectors of the Israeli Jewish population—secular kibbutzniks as well as yeshiva students from Merkaz HaRav. These partial sectors forge a true universal-general collective because they unite around a common idea and will. It should be clear that in these offerings there is a conflation between the general collective of the local community, Keshet, and that of the people of Israel as whole. The general collective of Keshet is a representative or metonym for *Knesset Yisrael*.

A central leitmotif of this initial number of the newsletter is what we might call the *gestalt* of the general will. Four articles in a newsletter of 13 handwritten pages concern themselves either with the realization of the general will of the Jewish people, or with the sublimation of individuals into the universal collective which carries the general will, or with both issues welded into a single thematic.

The joint settlement between religious and secular activists had other consequences. The notion that the general will was being realized and the Jewish People was realizing its authentic self certainly had a "redemptive" aspect to it. The period in which Keshet was founded was euphorically utopian—right after the trauma of the Yom Kippur War, the enthusiastic struggle for the Greater Land of Israel (mass demonstrations, the repeated settlement attempts) had a clear Messianic quality to it. The common devotion to the Greater Land of Israel on the part of both Orthodox and secular, and their community building partnership, was certainly

26 Ibid., 9.

part of the utopian ambience. Another equally, if not greater, element was the sense of emancipatory freedom that the utopian enthusiasm engendered: “The very power of the experience threw down all the barriers,” reported one participant. The utopian enthusiasm and fulfillment engendered a sense that the boundaries of a narrow religious life would be swept away. It would seem that the presence and participation of *hilonim* was a large part of this sense of freedom: They represented the “other side” of the restrictive boundaries, and the enthusiastic partnership with them rendered palpable the redemptive sense of infinite possibilities.²⁷

In the end, the period of emancipatory freedom was short-lived and the utopian drive was channeled into the attempt to create an exemplary strictly religious community. Eventually, all the original *hilonim* left. Yet, together with the trauma of Yom Kippur War and its indelible negative experience on its participants, the attempts to erect the first settlements in the 1970s—with their messianic and utopian enthusiasm—also constituted a foundational experience which was to shape Religious Zionist consciousness well into the future.

THE EFFECT OF THE YOM KIPPUR WAR on the Religious Zionist community was that it allowed it to compete for hegemony in Israeli society. That is, it allowed it to attempt to implement its overall vision of the Jewish State. That is the ultimate meaning of the settlement project—to build the state in a “redemptive” fashion—that the mundane and material spheres would reflect divine and Torah ideals and be regulated by them. As we have seen, according to the dominant religious Zionist trend, *Eretz Yisrael ha-Shelema* is the means, the condition, and the symbol of a Torah State.

Ultimately, the Yom Kippur War allowed this to happen because it completed the process by which a vacuum formed in the center of Israeli society. Following the Yom Kippur War, Labor Zionism lost its unequivocal leadership position and other groups, including Religious Zionism, started to compete for moral and political influence and even leadership. Moreover, as a result of the Yom Kippur War the Religious Zionists found legitimation for the quest for leadership. Following the religious philosophy based upon the thought of R. Kook, Religious Zionists, and especially the community’s youth, interpreted their wartime experience as the recovery of their authentic selves (collectively and individually) and their true will. They understood that this was the process that Israeli society as whole was undergoing. Furthermore, in accord with R. Kook’s philosophy, they understood that part of this process of self-discovery was the

27 Gideon Aran, *Me-Tzionut Datit le-Dat Tzionit*, 353–357. Shlomo Fischer, *Self-Expression and Democracy in Radical Religious Zionist Ideology* (Doctoral Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2007), 207ff.

recovery of the general will—the inner authentic will of *Am Yisrael*. They found confirmation for this in the massive participation in the demonstrations and in the settlement attempts in the Golan Heights and Judea and Samaria in the mid-1970s. This justified their attempts to initiate settlements and impact Israeli society by arguing that they were actualizing the true inner will of the Jewish People as a whole.

This claim has become a staple of Religious Zionist mainstream (Kookist) ideology. A case in point is the recent initiative of the Judicial Reform led by the Religious Zionist M.K. Simcha Rotman and Minister of Justice Yariv Levin. Despite the massive demonstrations against it, the movement's leaders continue to insist that the Reform is the people's true will. It is hard to escape the impression that this claim is populist development of the doctrine of the general will as developed by R. Kook and his disciples.

Moreover, the inner development that led to radical action on the part of religious Zionists was similar to other movements of social activism of the same period of time (the latter half of the twentieth century), namely feminism and the "identity politics" of racial and ethnic groups. The Yom Kippur War provided an element of "consciousness raising" and the discovery of one's true identity.

Thus, the Yom Kippur War has as important a place in the history of Religious Zionism as the Six Day War: only its contribution is not mainly theological but institutional and practical. Without the Yom Kippur War and the settlement effort in its wake, Israeli Religious Zionism, and probably Israeli society as a whole, would have had a totally different complexion.