

Transforming the Pain of Yom Ha'zikaron Into the Joy and Challenge of Yom Ha'atzmaut

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His name was Chaim; Chaim Avner, a name familiar to me for a long time, but I never really knew who he was, and I never had the chance to meet him, or to meet his very special family, until one Yom Hazikaron. I had seen them before, and even shared some of their most personal moments, but I never felt it was the right time and never wanted to intrude.

Chaim, you see, is close to a very close and old friend of mine. In fact, he is about as close as you can get; his grave lies next to Dani's on Mount Herzl, Israel's National Military Cemetery. Dani Moshitz of blessed memory, is still, and will always be to me, 20 years old, which is how old he was when he was killed in an ambush at the Kasmiyeh bridge in Lebanon, in 1985. He was killed just two days after Chaim of blessed memory, who was 27, doing a 16 day stint of reserve duty in Lebanon when a Hizballah terrorist drove his car bomb into their safari truck, killing him, along with eleven other soldiers on patrol in Southern Lebanon.

Every year, on Israel's national Memorial Day, at Yeshivat Orayta, the thought of staying isolated in our study hall in the Old City of Jerusalem while the entire country gathers in her cemeteries and memorials to remember those who fell in defense of the State of Israel, conflicts with the equally strong desire not to allow such a holy day to pass without the study of Torah, which after all, is the reason we had a home to come back to after 2,000 years. So we study Torah together at the entrance of the Mount Herzl Military Cemetery, after which I and some of the students go up to Dani's grave to pay our respects. At precisely 11:00 am a siren sounds, and the entire State of Israel grinds to a halt for a moment of silence. Radio and television broadcasts are interrupted, traffic stops and people get out of their cars, pedestrians on crowded streets all over Israel stand at attention and bow their heads, and even children stand in silence as an entire Nation takes a moment to remember the price we paid for the privilege of having a State and a homeland to call our own. And as the moment ends, and the siren

winds down, a very special Israeli Air force flight of four jets flying over Jerusalem crosses the airspace over the Old City, and one lone jet peels off and flies up into the sky until no longer visible, representing all the lonely soldiers who will never come home to the beloved arms of waiting mothers and fathers, spouses and siblings, children and close friends.

One year, in that moment, I found myself standing over the grave once again of Dani, my old and yet forever young friend who took me under his wing and remains ingrained in my memory, as one of those who helped to transform me from an American visitor to an Israeli.

I had a stone in my pocket I had brought back from Mila 18, the bunker which was the last stand of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and I decided to give it a home this year on Dani's grave. As I was standing there, I couldn't help noticing an older woman next to Chaim's grave who turned out to be his mother. What drew me to talk to her was the number tattooed on her arm.

Originally from Czechoslovakia, she lost her entire family, and survived Auschwitz at the tender age of sixteen. So what does a sixteen year old girl, with no-one and nothing in the world, do in 1945? She somehow managed to smuggle herself into Israel and build a beautiful family that is representative not only of her decision that life has to triumph over death, and good over evil, but as well, of the indomitable spirit of an entire people, that over two thousand years of pain and suffering refused to give up their dream of one day coming home, at last, to the land of Israel from whence they had been so cruelly exiled so long ago. And, together with her husband, changes their family name from Lichtenstein to Avner: Lichtenstein, licht, meaning candle or 'ner', and shtein, meaning stone, or 'even', hence the name Avner.

So how does such a woman continue after receiving, years later, that awful knock on the door from three Israeli Army Officers, coming to tell her she has lost her beloved son, Chaim, a name meaning life? And most incredible, how does she sit next to his grave, with her concentration camp number tattooed on her arm, sitting just inches from the Army I.D. number engraved on her son's grave, with a smile on her face? And how does she find the strength to smile and to say to me, with almost a grin, "yehiyeh tov", it will be good?

Indeed, this is the unasked question of the portions of *Acharei-Mot – Kedoshim*, which literally means 'After the death of holy ones': How does one follow such loss? From whence do we succeed in garnering strength and even hope, after such painful losses and challenging setbacks?

And of course, this is not just a question for individuals, but for an entire people as well. Where do the eight thousand Jews expelled from Gush Katif find the strength to continue, when it seems all their dreams have been shattered, and the land they loved and cultivated for over thirty years was turned over to the very terrorists who made their lives so difficult? What do you say to the mother who tells her son, Yochanan, an IDF soldier killed in combat defending the Jews of Gush Katif and the State of Israel, who was forcibly re-interred, his original grave ploughed over, and the spot where he was murdered handed over to the very terrorists responsible for his death?

Is the dream long gone? Is there a point to continuing?

There is a particular story in the Talmud which we studied together at Mount Herzl, which comes to mind:

*“Tanya: (a Beraita teaching us from the period of the Mishna): **Rabbi Yossi** said: Once I was walking along the way (**“Hayiti me’halech baderech**) and I went into one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray and Eliyahu (Elijah the prophet) came to watch over the entrance-way for me, until I finished my prayers. And when I finished my tefillah (my prayers) he said to me ‘peace unto you my teacher’ and I responded to him: ‘peace unto you my teacher and my master’, and he said to me: ‘my son, why did you enter this ruin?’ and I responded: to pray (le’hitpalel), and he said to me: “You should have prayed along the way (**baderech**)”, and I said: “I was afraid lest the wayfarers (the “ovrei’ drachim or passers along the way) would interrupt me (“yafsiku bi” literally: that they would stop in me”), and he said to me: “You should have prayed a short prayer”.*

“In that moment (said Rabbi Yossi), I learned from him (Eliyahu the prophet) three things:

- 1. I learned that one does not enter a ruin, and*
- 2. I learned that one prays along the way, and*
- 3. I learned that he who prays along the way should pray a short prayer ...”*

Given the fact that there are many great commentaries (the **Rambam**, the **Rashbam**, the **Ramchal**, and even the **Vilna Gaon**) who believe that these stories in the Talmud (known as the *Aggad’ta*) are not necessarily meant to be taken literally, but rather convey an important message, the question that begs response here is what, really, is the point of this story?

Rabbi Yossi, you see, lived in one of the most painful and challenging periods in Jewish History, the period during and immediately following, the Bar Kochba rebellion (131-135 C.E.).

Sixty some odd years after the Great Revolt (70 C.E.) which ended with the Destruction of the Second Temple, the murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews, and the tragic episode of Masada, the Jews had finally had enough. Led by Shimon Bar Kochba, one of the star students of Rabbi Akiva, the Jews rebelled against their Roman masters, determined to secure religious freedom. It made sense; after all, seventy years after the destruction of the first Temple (586 BCE), the Jews came home and built a second one, so after sixty years of pain, maybe it was finally time to rebuild the Temple for a third time? Especially given that the great Rabbi Akiva was a strong supporter, the Jews rallied to the fight.

But alas, it was not meant to be, and what followed was one of the darkest periods in all of Jewish History. Some historians believe that possibly as many as two million Jews were butchered over the next four years. And understand, there were no gas chambers or carbon monoxide vans, no machine guns and bullets, or even trains, they did all this with their hands. Imagine what savagery it must have taken to kill so many people.

And when it was over, Hadrian, the Emperor responsible for putting down the revolt, was determined to put an end to this spirit of independence that had ignited not one, but two revolts in less than seventy years, so he began to hunt down the Jews that remained, and forbade the study of Torah, the celebration of *mitzvot* and any expression of Jewish identity in public. And it was in this period, known as the Hadrianic persecutions, that Rabbi Yossi, one of the close disciples of Rabbi Akiva, taught Torah.

Can you imagine a more appropriate teacher to offer an opinion on this issue? How would Rabbi Yossi, who watched his beloved teacher, Rabbi Akiva, tortured and murdered before his very eyes, his skin flayed off his body with iron combs, deal with the struggle of keeping the dream of Judaism alive when it seems as though we have lost our way?

Indeed, the Jewish people entered a period of darkness, to the point that most Jews who survived in Israel went underground, living under conditions of near-starvation, in caves underground. (Over five thousand such caves, containing relics from the Jews of the post Bar Kochba era, have been discovered in the Elah and Beit Jubrin valleys west of Jerusalem).

Perhaps this vignette of Rabbi Yossi is meant to offer just such a response:

Rabbi Yossi represented, par excellence' the paradigm of the Jew 'walking along the way' ("*baderech*") : Studying Torah with no less than Rabbi Akiva, achieving high levels and struggling to become the best Jew he could be, he was clearly on the right *derech*, the road headed in the right direction.

And then tragedy strikes and all seems lost, and Rabbi Yossi 'enters the ruins', because in the face of such pain and calamity, how can you not be in ruins? And what do you do when you are in the ruins? What do you do when the path seems so long and so difficult, and you encounter the world of ruins? You take a break in order to pray, and to ask Hashem for help, right?

So why does Eliyahu, the prophet, seem to take issue with this? Why does he not even enter the ruin, instead remain standing watching by the doorway? And of course why is it specifically Eliyahu who shows up?

It is no accident that in Jewish tradition it is Eliyahu who symbolizes redemption, to the point that the prophet (*Navi*) **Malachi** tells us:

"Behold I will send to you Eliyahu the prophet, before the coming of the great day of Hashem... and he will return the hearts of fathers on the children and the hearts of children on their fathers..."
(Malachi 3:23-24)

So it is only natural that the response to the prayers of Rabbi Yossi is the arrival of the same Eliyahu, because the essence of Rabbi Yossi's question is: how long must we wait? When and from whence will the redemption come?

Indeed, prayer (a Christian word meaning to entreat or to beg) is not really a Jewish word nor does it reflect the same idea as the Hebrew word '*palel*'. When Ya'acov is on his deathbed and Joseph comes to visit him, he says (to Joseph, the son he thought he had lost for twenty two years):

"Ra'oh phanecha' lo' philalti"

"I never imagined, (I never dreamed) I would ever see your face again."

Ya'acov, who has been told his son was killed by a wild animal, never dreamed he would ever see him alive again. (See Rashi in Genesis (*Bereishit*) 48: 11)

So tefillah is all about dreaming, and the act we mistakenly call prayer is all about struggling with our dreams, which leads us to wonder whether this was precisely Rabbi Yossi's struggle: what

happened to that magnificent dream? How could it all have gone so wrong? And what do we know? Were we just dreaming a pipe dream? Are we fooling ourselves?

And make no mistake about it: this is precisely our struggle today and a struggle in every generation. What do you say to your students and to yourself, in the Warsaw ghetto? How did, nay, how could the Piazechna Rebbe have filled his students' heads and hearts with dreams of redemption and the joy of being Jewish just a few short years earlier? And how could Rabbi Yossi, and his role model, Rabbi Akiva, have done the same thing in the year 131 C.E.?

Maybe this is why Eliyahu does not enter the *churvah* (the ruins), because that is the secret: the world around you may be ablaze, but that does not mean you have to enter the ruins. It is no great accomplishment to stay the course and fill your heart with dreams, when the road lies open before you. In June 1967, after the paratroopers took back the ancient Jewish city of Jerusalem, everyone was a dreamer. The question is whether you can keep dreaming when you are surrounded by ruins.

And this is the message of Eliyahu: you have to stay on the path. And even more, you have to keep dreaming along that path. And you have to, as well, be willing to meet the wayfarers along the way.

I remember how a particular friend of mine tried very hard to dissuade me from going to the officer's course when I was in the army. 'After all' he said, 'you will be the only one with a *kippah* (yarmulke or skull cap) in your whole unit, and maybe even in your whole base; you'll be making *kiddush* alone, on *Shabbat* praying alone in the mornings and with no-one else to learn with; so what will happen to all your dreams?'

And there are so many who believe it is too risky; better to stay isolated, to maintain a certain level of sanctity and purity in the synagogue or the yeshiva, or even in the exile, than to risk mixing with or encountering those who will 'interrupt me' or, quite literally: cause in me an interruption of the spirit. But, says Eliyahu, you have to be willing to take that risk, and you have to make sure that even though that spiritual growth (or *tefillah/prayer*) may be shorter, it will be for all of us, and even for the wayfarers.

For me, that is the message of the wistfully smiling mother of Chaim Avner, a woman of valor in every sense of the word. In all the ruin that surrounded her, and even when the road seemed so unclear, she stayed the course, whether as a sixteen year old girl, or sitting alongside the grave of her holy son, buried in a military cemetery in Jerusalem, and kept up her journey, and continued to impact everyone she met along the way.

With the pain of that summer and all those special families uprooted from their homes still fresh in our hearts, and when it sometimes seems like we may have lost the way, we need to remember how important it is not to let ourselves enter the ruins, instead choosing to focus on the fact that in the end we are all on the same path, and we are all one: one people, and one family.

As we celebrate the blessing that Hashem has given us the privilege to witness, the return of the Jewish people to their homeland, let us be blessed, as well, with the strength to grow our dreams, along the way, making a difference to all those we meet.