

Yom Kippur Sermon  
The Wall, Post-Heroism and the Yearning

June 7, 2007 marked 40 years of reunified Jerusalem. It marked 40 years of Jewish presence at the Western Wall; 40 years of our return to the Temple Mount. 40 Years interestingly enough is the same number of years that the Jews spent in the desert. We as a people yearned for Jerusalem on a national as well as personal level for 2000 years.

I remember a story that gets told often in my family of my grandmother's cousin Michelin Bloch who was taken with many other French Jews into a camp in Vichy France. In that camp was another French Jew name Sizel. As the story goes the two began to dream, even in the midst of those gloomy circumstances . . . perhaps one day my granddaughter will marry your grandson in Jerusalem. That very story was told at the wedding of Yona Bloch (granddaughter of Michehlin Bloch), a young French immigrant to Israel to Dan Size (grandson of the other inmate of the camp Sizel), a young officer in the Israeli army and graduate of Yseshivat Har Etzion, each a grandchild of the survivors of that camp. The wedding, fulfilled the fantasy, it took place in Jerusalem. In how many gloomy circumstances, in how many moments of despair did our people year to return to Jerusalem?

There were even wedding invitations that would go out. The wedding of our children will take place in Jerusalem, the holy city. If however, Moshiach does not come it will take place at the Waldorf Astoria.

For 2000 years we yearned and for a good portion of that time we suffered the taunts of the Christians who used Jerusalem as a theological football with which to score points against us. A destroyed city Jerusalem and an exiled people of Israel became proof positive that God had Rejected us. And for 2000 years we prayed for the return of Jerusalem, we wept for her destruction and we longed for the protection of her walls. For all those years that we were citizens of no country, and protected by no king and no government, we longed to return to our homeland and holy city.

“And then sometime around 10:15 on the morning of June 7, 1967, almost exactly 2000 years since the beginning of the Jewish struggle with Rome. the first reservist paratroopers of Brigade 55 broke through the Shaar Arayot, Lion's Gate leading into the Old City of Jerusalem and reached the narrow enclave of the Western Wall. Having just fought a fierce two-day battle in the streets of east Jerusalem, in what for many was their first experience of combat. They leaned against the Wall, some in exhaustion, some in prayer. Several wept, instinctively connecting to the Wall's tradition of mourning the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty--precisely at the moment when Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem had been restored. These are the words of Yossi Klein Halevi as he describes that important morning. . . . A few hours later Yitzhak Yifat, a 24 year old reservist about to begin medical school, reached the wall with his brigade. They had just fought the fiercest battle of the war on ammunition hill. Something in their faces--perhaps a combination of exhaustion and uplift--caught the eye of news photographer David Rubinger. He lay on the ground and photographed the paratroopers, who appeared, in the subsequent photograph, almost statuesque. the picture of the paratroopers at the Wall has become, arguably, the most beloved Jewish

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photographic image of our time--appearing in Passover Hagadas and posters. The image endures, in part, because of the humility it conveys: At their moment of triumph, the conquerors are themselves conquered. The paratroopers, epitome of Zionism's "new Jews," stand in gratitude before the Jewish past, suddenly realizing that they owe their existence to its persistence and longing. They are the very definition of the new Jewish Hero, the pinnacle of a new age of Heroism. And without those 2000 years of persistence and longing would there have been a brigade to recapture Jerusalem."<sup>1</sup>

40 years later Israeli Journalist Yossi Klein Halevi revisits those heroic moments with the famous Yitchak Yifat. "What were you thinking about [as the picture was taken]?" asked Halevi "Jewish history. Judah Macabee and Bar Kochba. and the Holocaust," responded Yifat. The Jews who fought back, and the Jews who had no means of fighting back. Thought Halevi "What does the Wall mean to you today?" asked the journalist "I'll be honest with you. It was one thing when the Wall was the national symbol. But since it has become a synagogue, I feel less at home there," responded the veteran of Israel's toughest battle.

When I read that line, those words I had to sit back for a few minutes. I was first offended, what is so wrong with being a synagogue. I happened to like Synagogues. Then I was saddened, that he saw a dichotomy between the national historical side of the Wall and its religious significance. To me the two are inextricably linked. Does Yifat really believe that without those thousands of years of yearning in the synagogues, without the thousands of years of praying for the return of Jerusalem that there would be a people to organize themselves to recapture a homeland and a holy site? There is no other example of a people who have lived without a homeland and survived as such. And the Jews survived because of the Synagogues and the Sabbaths, because of a commitment to history, tradition and to the longing for something better.

Then I began to wonder for all of Yitchak Yifat's and his generations commendable record of service to the history of the wall, and to Israel's struggle for survival, why has it become a synagogue and not something else, a museum and national monument or something more in line with the secular vision?

I suppose for Yifat and secular Jews it represents a vindication of all the past struggles those of Judah The Macabee and of Bar Kochbah and the Holocaust. It is perhaps the final arrival. A moment that we pay allegiance to remember all the struggles of history and appreciate, savor our victory and vindication. But after that heroic moment, what happened. Is this the Jewish version of the ill chosen emotion of Alexander the Great? "And Alexander wept for there were no more worlds left to conquer."

Have the people of Israel stopped looking for something better. Are all the great battles in the past.

Israeli Minister of Knesset Effi Eitam reflected that the first 100 years of Zionism, were under constant threat fighting for our existence. Now Israel enjoys day to day security.

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<sup>1</sup> Halevi, Yossi Klein, "The Photograph" *Azzure*

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Yes there is an Iranian threat, but on a daily level Israel enjoys a comfortable life, and Zionism has entered a new phase, one where it is not threatened so. The results are the unraveling of our passion. Now that Jerusalem is recaptured and the great battles, have been fought and the heroes have been decorated, the country is simply apathetic, in search of where it will go.

For the past 3 years the number of Yordim, or expatriates who leave Israel, has been larger than the number of Olim, new immigrants. The elite units of the Israeli army once populated by would be Medical Students like Yitchak Yifat, are now entirely made up of the religious Zionists. In 67 anyone who avoided military service would have trouble finding employment or acceptance by peers. Now it has become increasingly more popular to avoid military service, by producing injuries and conditions, in a manner that is not altogether different than the way our ancestors avoided being drafted by the Czar. In truth, the many of the Israeli youth are not only questioning the heroics of defending the Jewish people, they are questioning why live in the Jewish state, and they leave. In an article several years ago, a journalist investigated the whereabouts of the children of Israel's heroes, Rabin, Barak, Pares to discover many of whom live abroad. Every parent has struggles, but what does it say when the children of all the leadership legends have opted out of the country, opted out of the dream.

The longing for the homeland, the age of heroism is slowly slipping away and many of Zion's children with it. Do you know that the largest Seder in the world is not in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Tzfat or Be'er Sheva, it is the Chabbad of Katmandu which holds it for Israelis traveling in or living in that region.

Even the virtue of the Wall is being called into question. The next generation see the wall as another synagogue that they do not go to. They never lived without the wall, they never knew the longing. To my great pain they think of the wall and the gains of June 1967 as one more burden. One more obstacle and nuisance between themselves that the rest of their lives. I do not exaggerate. Israeli historian Tom Segev recently called the day on which Jerusalem was recaptured a Yartzeit.

This past year was called by one correspondent in Israel's Haaretz newspaper the "Year that no one Cared". It was a year of unprecedented moral carnage. This past year Israel's president resigned over multiple charges of sexual harassment, the finance minister resigned over charges of embezzlement, the justice minister for sexual misconduct, the police chief for professional misconduct, and the military chief of staff for mishandling the war in Lebanon. The prime minister is being criminally investigated on 4 counts of graft including his role in the sale of a Bank, his approval rating is at 3% and no one seems to be calling for a change. Where is the caring, the outrage, where is the yearning for a better state, where are our heroes.

The mood was summarized well in two words, by Roy Cohen in a New York Times Magazine article Israel is discomfited by "the adornments of an increasingly moneyed, Americanized and *post heroic* society.". The words post-heroic suggest that there is nothing remarkable left to achieve in life, that we are in some kind of endless cycle of

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been there, done that. There are no more great frontiers of improvement or development. It is the mood of post heroism that terrifies me more than anything else.

But what of those that have turned the Wall into a synagogue, what do we learn from them? What does that place represent? There is no question and no doubt that they feel that it is a place to be closer to God, a place where God's presence was palpably felt—the echoes of which are still palpable today. It is a place of holiness and of religious history.

But it is also more; it is more because they know that Jewish Law, the Halacha surprisingly demands for them to rip their garments at the very sight of the wall. When one sees the Temple Mount, the Western Wall for the first time, or if one has not visited for 30 days. One is obligated to tear a garment in mourning, just as one is obligated to tear for the loss of a relative.

Why should this be so? Does not the recapture of Jerusalem represent one of the happiest moments in Jewish history since the victory of Judah Macabee?

The reunification of Jerusalem is of course a joyous event. But the sight of a destroyed temple is still exactly that a destroyed temple. It is a reminder not just of the moments when we could feel God's presence, but also of the moments when we could not stop fighting amongst ourselves long enough to protect it. It is a reminder of the corrupt generations that followed the heroic return of and rebuilding of the temple. It is a reminder of all the repairs left to do in the world, personal, and public. It is a reminder of both the personal pettiness and the public poverty that must be erased. It is a reminder of ignorance and the intolerance that still run rampant. It is a beacon to all of us to do our part to do what the mussar masters would call Tikun Hamidot, to improve our personality traits, to abolish anger and to shrink our pride. To yearn for the Awe of Heaven and love of our fellow humans.

The Talmud Yerushalmi in the tractate about Yom Kippur says .

אילו הוא החריבו כל דור שאינו נבנה בימיו מעלין עליו כ

Any generation that has not succeeded in rebuilding the temple is considered guilty of having destroyed it. It means all the ills that caused the downfall have not yet been corrected. For the worshipers at the Kotel, the wall yearns, it demands, it calls them to be better, kinder more pious, to fix not only their world but themselves, to be forever striving for a better self. To me the most encouraging aspect of the patrons of the wall is that there is still a heroic frontier, still a vision of a world that needs improvement. They still understand that the Zionist dream has not been fully realized. The key ingredient is the yearning for improvement of themselves and their world, religiously, ethically, socially and spiritually.

It is easy to see these changes in Israel, it is a distinct society in its own boarder, and its own media, its own elections. But is this not also a description of us, and where we are today? Do we not also suffer from a touch of Post Heroism? Where is our longing? Should we not demand more for ourselves?

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If you go to the far southern end of the western wall, the wall captured by Yifat and his heroic comrades, you will find a stone with a marking on it that indicates that it was their that the Shofar was blown.

The model for the sounds of the shofar come from the strangest of places. The mother of a pseudo hero, the mother of the general Sisra. This obscure woman appears in the book of Judges for but a few sentences. Her son commands an army that is technologically superior to that of the children of Israel led by Barak and Devorah. Sisra fights with chariots against barak's pruning hooks. When his army is defeated, he outstrips his own soldiers in retreat and runs to hide in the tent of Yael, where he later falls.

It is not Sisra that we look to for the sounds but his mother who waits for the her son to return. How does she fill the time as she looks out the window waiting? She fills the time by fantasizing that her cowardly son is actually dividing the spoils of war. It takes him so long because there are so many treasures to divide. Is not her cry then the cry of dismantling her own delusion? Is not her cry the cry of being forced to no longer pretend all is well? Is this not the cry of realizing that her son the hero is little more than her son the coward?

We all face these moments of reckoning. We face the hygienist—at which point we will have to admit we have not been flossing. Or we face our checkup or the life insurance nurse, our personal trainer or even our own home weight scale —at which point we will have to admit that not only have we not lost those 10 pounds we have actually added another 5. And then we cannot pretend anymore.

And today a week after the shofar has been blown we have to face the same in terms of our own moral and spiritual development. It is time to strip down illusions and ask ourselves the hardest questions.

Personal Trainers help us achieve the body we want, investment advisors help us review our portfolios, Decorators help us improve the appearance of our homes. Our bodies, our wealth and our homes get the review the scrutiny and the very important longing to be better. But do we do that for our most inner selves our spiritual being.

I want to avoid nebulous language. What do I mean by spiritual. I mean those qualities that we would hold as our personal and religious ideal. How we speak to each other, how we speak to our children, our parents. How generous are we, with our money, our time, our homes? Do we strive to be humble, and friendly. Do we thank God on a regular basis for the gifts we have. Do we remain faithful to our own values of honesty, integrity study of Torah? Do we think about what we can do to make our world, community or synagogue a better place. Those are some of the questions of the would be spiritual trainer.

This is the risk of the wall and it is the risk of our continent. We live in a post heroic world. I believe the survivors, the veterans, and the builders had the moment of heroism. But we their children and grandchildren, struggle to find our heroic moment.

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With the greatest of humility, pressed by a sense of urgency I suggest that our heroism is to restore the longing, the desire to achieve personal inner greatness and spirituality. We no longer fight the external enemy as much as we wrestle to develop our inner selves. It is exactly as the Mishna in Pirke Avot, “Who is a hero? He who conquers his own self, his own inclinations.” The first battle is internal.

We sit among heroes of this community, one might be next to you, you might even be one. What I do know is that everyone here has the potential to be a hero. You are likely to see one of these heroes, someone who fought in Israel’s wars, or survived the Holocaust, or liberated the camps, or built this community. This past year we lost a few of such heroes - one of the 5 people who ever escaped Auschwitz. Are we content to be the post heroic who can say we sat between the heroes. When we go up to God at the end of our days will we be willing to say to him, I would have been better but there were no real challenges in my day. Do we think that will pass muster.

There is genocide in Darfur, there are hungry in our city, there are empty seats every week in the synagogue. Yesterday, I found out that my own university, Columbia, is inviting the president of Iran, a holocaust denier, and a proponent of genocide to speak. I am inclined to get on a plane and burn my diplomas on the university steps in outrage. There are battles left to fight, there certainly are.

But it all starts here. Today we will use the Machzor to conquer our inner selves, to ask the hard questions and to restore the yearning. We will conquer ourselves, much the same as Yifat conquered Jerusalem, and then we will be ready for our community and our world. We will motivate ourselves by yearning for more, for growth, for improvement, religiously, ethically, socially and spiritually and with this hunger we will find our own heroism.