

DAYS OF AWE IN TIMES OF WAR

Reflections from the Father of a Fallen Hostage

Rabbi Doron Perez



**Dedicated by the Moshal Family
In memory of Captain Daniel Perez and Tzevet Perez
and all the fallen soldiers
and for the speedy return of all the hostages.**

Especially now, let's bring the Bayit into our bayit

**L'ilui Nishmat Captain Daniel Perez hy"d,
for all the holy fallen soldiers,
and for the safe return of all the hostages.
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Batsheva Sadan shared a story about a conversation with her son, a soldier in Gaza, who, after 100 days of reserve duty, said the first thing he wanted to do when he returned home was to buy a picture of the Beit HaMikdash and hang it in his room. He explained that in every room in Gaza there is a picture of the Al-Aqsa mosque, and he wanted to remind himself of what this war is truly about.

This story inspired our family to initiate a project that develops a deeper connection and yearning for the Beit HaMikdash, and a deeper understanding of what we are fighting for.

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PRESS

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About Daniel Perez, z”l

Captain Daniel Perez, son of Rabbi Doron and Shelley, was taken hostage on October 7th, 2023 having fought valiantly together with his tank crew for hours in the defense of Nachal Oz. After 163 days, he was declared deceased as of Simchat Torah / October 7th and, as of this writing, his body is still being held in Gaza, awaiting a dignified Jewish burial.



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Broken Completeness

Yom Teruah and Simchat Torah

Rosh Hashanah is one of the most mysterious days on the Jewish calendar. Its essence is very elusive.

It is the beginning of the year or more accurately the head of the year – Rosh Hashanah – while at the same time being the day of judgment. It is at once a happy festival, a *moed*, of celebration while at the same time a day of awe and trepidation where our lives hang in the balance. We celebrate it as a Yom Tov like all of the ימים טובים (festivals) with festive meals yet we do not say *Hallel* – the Prayer of Thanksgiving – at all because of the atmosphere of awe and judgment.

The centerpiece of the day is, of course, the *shofar* – the ram's horn – the very symbol of Rosh Hashanah. We begin the New Year with the haunting *shofar* blasts as this is the very meaning our sages give through the name of the day itself as it appears in the Torah: “יום תְּרוּעָה – the day of the *teruah* blasts” (Bamidbar [Numbers] 29:1).

Simply put, this means that it is a day of the blowing of the *shofar* – but what is the nature of this blowing? What does the word תְּרוּעָה mean – the very word which describes the essence of the day?

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תְּרוּעָה is a note of celebration as the Hebrew word, *teruah* means to trumpet sounds of celebration. This is also the simple meaning of the blessing Bilaam gave when he spoke of G-d being amongst the Children of Israel: “וּתְרוּעַת מְלִיךָ בּוֹ” and the King’s acclaim in their midst” (Bamidbar 23:21). *Teruah* therefore refers to a celebration, perhaps as the trumpets and instruments blast at the coronation of the king, and the time of gathering the people at the time of assembly and celebration.

Ibn Ezra explains that this is a reference to celebrating the king as straightforward reading implies. Rashi interprets the word *teruah* as based on the word רֵעָה which means friendship and implies the closeness of Hashem.

The Targum Onkelos, the most ancient commentary on the Chumash, explains (on the above verse in Bamidbar) that the word תְּרוּעָה means a broken sighing sound. Indeed, the Arizal points out that the word *teruah* itself means brokenness as we see explicitly in the verse “תִּרְעָם בְּשֵׁבֶט בַּרְזֶל” You should bash them with an iron rod” (Tehillim [Psalms] 2:9), which clearly means breaking.

Our sages interpret this to mean either a longer, broken sound – what we call שְׁבָרִים – or short, staccato notes which are a weeping, crying sound. Since the *teruah* is both a sign of anguished sighing – שְׁבָר, brokenness – and bitter crying, this clearly implies that the day of blowing the *shofar* is not one of celebration, but one of crying and sighing?! What is going on?

Is *Yom Teruah* a day of coronation and celebration or a day of sighing and crying?

There could not be a greater dichotomy between these understandings of תְּרוּעָה – a call of closeness, friendship, and celebration,

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or a call of pain, groaning and crying?

The answer, it seems, is that it is both at the very same time. We feel so close to G-d at times like a friend and feel the privilege of living in His world – we celebrate and coronate Him. Yet at the same time we feel so distant, fractured and broken – so many things in life are not the way that they should be. In our distance, we yearn for closeness. The *shofar* is the most visceral, natural, deepest human cry for closeness, celebrating the privilege of feeling close and at the same time yearning from a broken heart when we feel so distant.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are somehow whole and broken at the same time. Complete, yet fractured. The mainstay of Rosh Hashanah is to pray for a vision of an ideal world. A utopian world where we all follow the word of G-d and a life of spiritual and moral clarity. We so deeply crave to live this ideal, but in the reality of life, we are often very distant from achieving it. Hopes, dreams, and aspirations often come crashing down in the harsh reality of life. The distance between the real and the ideal is where life is lived. We celebrate when our reality is close to the ideal we envision. We are broken and yearning when we feel so distant.

This Tishrei period marks one year since the worst pogrom since the Holocaust. Our family, amongst over 1,000 others, will be commemorating one year since our child was killed and in our case taken hostage. All of the Jewish people as a collective – both in Israel and around the world – are in many ways broken and fractured. No festival more than Rosh Hashanah, though, calls upon us to strive for wholeness in our brokenness and completeness in our fractured state. The *shofar* more than any other instrument represents this duality.

It is for this reason that we never blow the broken *shevarim* or *teruah* blasts with them always being preceded and followed by the *tekia* blast, the whole unbroken triumphant blast. Life has much pain, crying, and brokenness but it is enveloped in wholeness, wholesomeness, and happiness.

The happy-sad celebrations

I have come to the realization that the happiest occasions of our lives also contain some of the saddest and most painful moments.

I learned this bittersweet lesson at my father's milestone birthday celebration a number of months ago. Our family got together for the occasion and all the grandchildren were together for the first time since the *shiva* – all except our beloved Daniel z"l. My sister, Ariella, called all the grandsons to have a photo with Grandpa Gil. As they all came forward it became blatantly clear that one was missing. My wife Shelley and I broke down crying and we had to leave the room.

My sister came after me, apologizing for causing us pain. "I'm so, so sorry," she said. I responded that she had absolutely nothing to apologize for. "How can we deny grandpa the special opportunity to have a picture with his grandchildren? It's absolutely the right thing. But, equally," I said, "Shelley and I cannot be denied the right to break down and cry for the pain of Daniel's absence. Everybody needs to do what they need to do." I continued, "It's okay, Ariella... it's so NOT okay, but it is okay!"

This line has become a kind of motto and meditation for me since then – life is so not okay, but it is somehow okay. Indeed, life will never be okay for Shelley and I and our family, or for anyone

who has lost a family member, but somehow I feel that it is okay. I then internalized this painful dichotomy – that the absence of Daniel’s presence will be most acutely felt specifically on the happiest occasions. The happiest occasions of our lives will now be tinged with some of the most sad and painful moments. That is okay – it is so NOT okay, but it’s okay.

My sister’s son got engaged a short while thereafter, *Baruch Hashem* [thank G-d]. As soon as they announced the engagement, my first feeling was of great happiness – for the couple, for my sister’s family, for my parents, and our whole family. We need *simchas* (celebrations). Then all of a sudden, at the same time, I felt a sharp pain. The realization that Daniel will not be present at the engagement party or the wedding celebration. That our beloved Daniel – שְׁלֵנוּד הַמָּוֶד, as my wife would call him – won’t himself ever get engaged or married. This is so absolutely not okay, and it never will be. But, somehow, we are okay and it will be alright.

I then retroactively understood much better that this is exactly what happened to us at our then-injured son Yonatan’s wedding on October 17th. After all, Yonatan, Daniel’s older brother and best friend, was scheduled to be married on October 17th / the 3rd of Marcheshvan. Yonatan was injured in the battles on that fateful day, and Daniel was considered missing since October 7th. We made the difficult decision – at the insistence in particular of my courageous wife Shelley – to continue with the wedding as scheduled. Yonatan and Galya would get married at the scheduled time, albeit a much smaller wedding in our hometown of Yad Binyamin, with most invited to join on livestream.

How were we to have a wedding of one beloved son while we

had so recently learned that our other beloved son was missing and in all likelihood held by Hamas? Although it felt like the right thing to do, how is it emotionally possible to do such a thing? How could we possibly genuinely celebrate Yonatan's wedding while our other son, Daniel, was shockingly missing?! How can we have a whole-hearted celebration when we are so heartbroken?! I didn't know how I was going to get through it.

So, leading up to the wedding I developed a strategy, a coping mechanism, which I thought would help me get through the wedding in one piece. I told myself that on the night of the wedding I would not think about Daniel at all. If I were to, I felt scared that it would simply be too painful. So I had decided that through the duration of the wedding, I would only think about Yonatan.

Just before going to the *chuppah*, my wife Shelley said that she wanted to go into Daniel's room. Daniel was the most stylish person in our family and he had bought a beautiful suit especially for the wedding – he was supposed to be the best man. She wanted to feel his suit in order to feel his presence before going to the *chuppah*. I didn't want to go into his room or feel his suit. It was too painful and on the contrary – I was trying to put him out of my mind in order to get through the wedding.

When we came out of the room, I said, "Shell, let's focus now on what we have – Yonatan. Let's focus on him, it's his wedding."

My plan was working and the wedding felt very happy and special. We went from the *chatan's tisch* (reception) to the *bedeken* (veiling) to the *chuppah* and we were very happy and living in the special moment of our first child's wedding. And then it shifted.

The officiating rabbi, my friend and colleague from Yad Binyam-

in, Rabbi Hillel Mertzbach began the *chuppah* in tears saying, “How can we begin the wedding without talking about the person who is not here with us and who should be here – Daniel?” I remember looking at him in disbelief – I was trying not to think about Daniel, and he was crying and talking about Daniel. As he continued, we all broke down and cried bitterly. We then prayed for Daniel under the *chuppah* saying some *Tehillim* for his safety and speedy return. Those few minutes were amongst the most painful of my life. The rabbi, of course, was 100% correct in mentioning Daniel. It really would have been so inappropriate to go through the *chuppah* without significantly acknowledging the one whose presence was so glaringly missing and whose predicament was on all of our minds. As painful as it was, Daniel had to be acknowledged and we needed to cry bitterly to feel his absence.

But then, an amazing thing happened. We took tissues and wiped away the tears and shifted to happiness – it was time for the *chuppah* of our son Yonatan – it was now time to celebrate. We continued and had the most incredible and beautiful *chuppah*. One of our close friends said that the *chuppah* was “the holiest, saddest, happiest, and most uplifting *chuppah*” that she had ever attended. For my wife and I, it was predominantly an overwhelmingly happy occasion. Family pictures were very difficult but that passed quickly and we returned to the *simcha*. It was a happy and exhilarating wedding tinged with moments of great pain.

Joy and trepidation, angst and appreciation

When reflecting on the wedding the next morning, I realized that I was able to bring Daniel with me under the *chuppah* and onto

the dance floor and somehow genuinely celebrate while feeling so acutely the excruciating absence of his presence. I could somehow carry intense happiness and sadness at the same time; הֵדוּת and הֵרָדוּת – joy and trepidation. Great appreciation for Yonatan surviving October 7th with ‘only’ a bullet piercing his thigh and making it to his wedding, while feeling intense angst and fear for Daniel’s fate. To be wholeheartedly happy and heartbroken at the same time.

This unexpected insight allowed me to help a number of families who approached weddings soon after tragedy.

One example is friends of a friend who had heard about Yonatan’s wedding so soon after Daniel was declared missing. They were about to marry off a son soon after their daughter had tragically committed suicide. Terribly, she had been sexually abused as a child by an acquaintance, eventually being institutionalized where she had committed suicide at the age of 18. The mother was devastated and her son was now getting married and she didn’t know how she would get through it. She phoned me and told me the story and how she was dreading her son’s wedding as she felt that the pain of the loss of her daughter would be too much for her to bear under the *chuppah*. She simply didn’t know how she would get through it. “How did you manage to celebrate?” she asked.

I told her that I too was fearful that I wouldn’t be able to celebrate. I shared with her that my way of coping was to try to put Daniel out of my mind during the *chuppah* and how my plan failed when the rabbi correctly spoke at length about him under the *chuppah* and we were forced to confront the pain of the absence of Daniel’s presence.

I shared with her this great life-altering insight that although I

didn't think it possible, we were able to celebrate genuinely and carry the pain. I said to her, "You owe it to your daughter to cry for her under the *chuppah* and feel the loss of her presence at this wedding where her presence is so intensely missed. The way to honor her is to break down and cry for her, as painful as it is. I promise you that as painful as it is, it will pass and it will be ok – I promise you it will pass."

"Are you sure it will pass – what if it is too painful to bear and I won't be able to celebrate?" she questioned. I responded that both my wife and I managed somehow to do it and that it is possible to do it. I assured her that the pain would pass and that she would have an incredible *simcha*. "Your son is getting married and that is a beautiful *simcha* to be grateful for – don't dread a *simcha*. Look forward to it and it will be okay. We did and so will you." We spoke on the day of the wedding for a final pep talk and reassurance. She called me the next day to tell me that the wedding was beautiful and as we discussed, she was able to navigate all the emotions, *Baruch Hashem*.

The greatest lesson for me from the marriage of Yonatan while our dearest Daniel was missing is how expansive the human heart is. That it is indeed somehow possible to hold totally conflicting emotions at the same time. That our happiest occasion was tinged with our saddest moments. That appreciation for Yonatan and deep angst and anxiety for Daniel can be contained together. That blessing and curse, the exhilaration of that which is present and the pain and yearning for that which is absent can somehow live together.

If I forget thee O Jerusalem

I then realized that this is exactly what our sages want us to feel at every Jewish wedding. At every wedding the *chatan* (groom) and *kallah* (bride) and their families are overjoyed by each other's presence. It is the bride and groom's greatest celebration and happiest occasion. But something is sorely missing: Hashem's presence amongst us – the Temple in Jerusalem has not been rebuilt, the *Beit HaMikdash* remains broken. Jewish law calls on every *chatan* and *kallah* to break a glass under their wedding canopy to acknowledge this brokenness. Some have a custom to place ash from the destruction of Jerusalem on the forehead of the *chatan* to acknowledge the destruction. Specifically at the height of our happiness, we are called upon to feel a tinge of intense sadness at the absence of Hashem's presence. At the time when we are building our new home, we ought to feel the loss of Hashem's home. As we build our *בֵּית נְאֻמָּן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל*, we remember how His *בֵּית*, the ultimate home – the *בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ*, is missing.

The words that every Jewish bride and bridegroom are called upon to utter at their happiest time is the very oath that the Jewish exiles to Babylon were called upon to make. The context is most powerful and telling as the oath is explicitly mentioned in *Tehillim* in response to a cruel request of the Babylonian captors. While approaching the rivers of Babylon, the exiles, apparently the Levites, were still holding their harps and instruments that were played joyously in the Temple – they were the singers and musicians whose joyous melodies accompanied the daily service in Jerusalem. They were asked by their captors to sing a song of Zion, the songs they would sing to G-d in the Temple. Feeling the pain of exile they made

an oath to themselves:

“If I forget thee O Jerusalem let my right hand wither. Let my tongue cling to my palate if I don’t mention you; if I don’t raise Jerusalem at the heights of my happiness.” (Tehillim 137:5-6)

It is this very oath that we say under the *chuppah*. Our sages so powerfully and poignantly called upon every Jewish couple at the height of their greatest happiness to remember this oath of our exiled forebears. That we cannot sing with a full heart in exile while recalling the brokenness. That as a whole we feel there is so much brokenness. While we feel so perfect at this time personally, there are so many collective imperfections. While we rejoice, many others are suffering. At our personal happiest celebration, we ought to be cognizant of the great pain and sadness others feel.

The double meaning of ‘shever’ – brokenness

Not only does *teruah* have a dual meaning, as we have explained, but so does the *shevarim*. The root of *shevarim* is the singular שָׁבַר – which, as we have seen, means broken. A crisis, where we often feel broken, is the Hebrew word מְשֻׁבָּר – from the same root word. There is a lot of brokenness in crisis.

But there is a remarkable twist both in the words *mashber* and *shever*. Incredibly, according to *Chazal* [our Sages] and also in Tanach [Hebrew Bible] a *mashber* also means a birthing stone – the place where the mother gives birth (see, for example, Yeshayahu [Isaiah] 37:3 and the commentary of Rashi and Metsudot).

Where is the crisis and brokenness in childbirth – is it not the birth of a new baby? The Malbim explains (in his commentary to Yeshayahu 37:3) that during childbirth the baby, as we know, has

to break through the body in order to come out. The path to childbirth is an arduous journey of the fetus from the uterus through the birth canal which comes with the intense and excruciating pain as the body contracts. There is so much blood and bodily injury to the mother during this painful process of the baby breaking through the body to get out. Hence, the place of this pain and brokenness – the birthing stone – is called a *mashber*.

But it is so much deeper and profound. This dramatic experience of childbirth is seen by our sages as reflecting the Jewish view to pain and crisis. Childbirth is a dangerous experience for both mother and child. So much so, that for the first three days after childbirth a woman is forbidden to fast, even on Yom Kippur. Her body has been through such a trauma that will take months and sometimes years to fully heal. Despite this painful process, it is for the good – a new life emerges. Our great prophets and sages have seen this as the paradigm for all of human suffering. At times the pain is severe and agonizing, and often we don't understand why we are going through it which adds to the agony. Nonetheless our sages encourage us that in Hashem's world, even when we can't always see it, it is somehow always for the good.

So too, the word *shever* (brokenness) in Tanach often means something entirely different, almost the exact opposite.

Many times in the story of Yosef the word *shever* is used in a totally different and positive context. Ya'akov says to his children, "Go to Mitzrayim [Egypt], כִּי יֵשׁ שָׂבָר בְּמִצְרָיִם, because there is grain in Mitzrayim." (Bereishit [Genesis] 42:1)

How remarkable is the holy Hebrew language that here *shever* is not pain, brokenness or crisis, but it is the solution to the crisis. The

crisis is the regional debilitating famine and the solution is *lishbor bar* – which means to acquire grain. The thing which breaks the brokenness of famine is the *shever* itself, grain and sustenance.

Therefore Yosef is called the *mashbir* – the sustainer.¹

In the remarkably hopeful world of G-d, *shever* – brokenness – is somehow the source of completeness and wholeness.

It is even deeper.

Crying and celebrating – בְּכִי וְשִׁירוֹת

In *Tehillim* 68, it says, “מוֹצִיא אֲסִירִים בְּכוֹשָׁרוֹת” – G-d takes out prisoners *bakosharot*.” It’s not clear exactly what the word *kosharot* means. According to the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 68:4), you can interpret it as: *bechi veshirot*, we came out of Mitzrayim crying and celebrating. Crying for how many people had died – according to *Chazal*, at least four-fifths of the nation – but even without that, how many families had come out incomplete? Similar to after the *Shoah* [Holocaust] – how many families had lost family members and were broken, and came out *bechi veshirot*, *bakosharot*, with crying and singing at the same time?

How is it possible to simultaneously sing from joy and cry from loss? How does it work?

It seems that the basis for love and joy is exactly the same as that at the heart of loss. We deeply miss our child and we therefore pine and yearn for them. Isn’t this based on the same love and yearning we have for loved ones who are physically present? It’s the same place in the *nefesh* [soul] which yearns to celebrate the presence of somebody we love and intimately desire their closeness of presence. The Sefat Emet therefore says² that *Eicha* [Lamentations] and *Shir*

HaShirim [Song of Songs], are kind of parallel books because of *ba-kosharot* – one is *bechi* and one is *shiro*t. How can that be – one is about intense love between loved ones and the other is about mourning and lamentations for the loss of the Temple? As we have seen, both are about pining and yearning, and hence love and loss, crying and celebrating are connected.³

Laughing and crying

We all know how close tears of joy and tears of pain are. We laugh so much sometimes that we begin to cry. Sometimes we can even transition quickly from crying to laughing. Laughing and crying are salient human qualities. Animals can't cry, and even those who do – the laughing hyena, crocodile tears – come from their sweat glands, not from the tear ducts. They are nothing like human humor or painful anguish but, rather, instinctive reactions. Only a human being is able to both laugh and cry – remarkably, they stem from the very same physical source of tear ducts. So too emotionally and spiritually, they stem from the same place in the *nefesh*.

The tears of Rosh Hashanah, the tears of the *shofar*, the brokenness, is also the celebration. Because we're so close to Hashem, and because we live in His world and want to be in His presence, we feel at the very same time how lacking we are. We feel so distant. We celebrate our intimate closeness and yearn for Hashem's presence from the place that we feel so distant.

The Festival of Matzot

This dichotomy of crying and singing, of the duality of the *teruah* as both a crying and celebratory note, also explains the mystery of

the *matzah*.

The two main months of the year, which occur exactly six months apart, are Tishrei and Nissan. They are the months laden with the most religious significance. In Tishrei, we celebrate the creation of the world with the festivals of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Simchat Torah. In Nissan, we have the festival of Pesach celebrating the birth and redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian servitude. The symbol of Tishrei is the *shofar* and the symbol of Nissan and Pesach is the *matzah*. On nine different occasions, the Torah commands us to eat *matzah* during the festival of Pesach, and indeed, in our prayers, the festival itself is called *Chag HaMatzot*, the Festival of Matzot.

The *mitzvah* of *matzah* is confusing. On the one hand, we begin the Haggadah with the words אֶת־לֶחֶם מַצֹּת אֲנִי עֹמְדִים, this is the bread of affliction – it's the bread that we ate as slaves. For almost 100 years this was the bread of slavery, the unleavened bread of the poor and the afflicted. It is this that we remember at the beginning of the *Seder* as the Torah itself calls the bread אֶת־לֶחֶם עֲנִי, the bread of affliction.

On the other hand, the bread is undoubtedly the bread of redemption, symbolizing the very food we took out at the time of our redemption itself. The Haggadah explicitly says that the reason we eat the *matzah* is because at the very moment of our redemption, we left in haste, in a hurry, and the bread we were preparing did not have time to rise as the Egyptians expelled us from Egypt (Shemot [Exodus] 12:39). Could Hashem not have orchestrated things that after so much suffering and servitude we could at least leave Egypt with piping hot, fresh bread?

Why did the bread of freedom and redemption have to be the

very same bread of our affliction?

By now, of course, we know the answer – it is the duality of human life, and certainly of Jewish life. The light of redemption came with so much darkness and suffering. So many died in Egypt and every family had lost someone. Generations of immeasurable suffering came at a huge price. At the same time, though, G-d was redeeming them, doing the unthinkable, bringing a nation of slaves out in broad daylight from the cruel and oppressive pharaohs of Egypt. Something unprecedented in the annals of human history – the suffering and the salvation were so interlinked. Such is the duality and dichotomy of life.

Simchat Torah this year – עַתְּ סִמְחַת תּוֹרָה וְעַתְּ רִקּוּד

This Simchat Torah, the last of the festivals of Tishrei, will be the hardest one that any of us have ever experienced. No festival will capture this duality of life more than this one.

On the one hand, we are celebrating – holding and dancing with the Torah, the source of our life and meaning. What are we as a people without the values of the Torah? It is impossible to understand the Jewish mission without the unique vision of life and light that Hashem has bestowed upon us through the Torah. We dance and celebrate this privilege in both the night and the day. As we complete the reading of the Torah and begin it at the very same time, the Torah encompasses us from beginning to end and we celebrate this privilege.

At the same time, this is the most painful Simchat Torah that any of us can ever remember. Perhaps amongst the most painful in our people's history. There will be around 1,300 families across

Israel mourning the loss of their beloved on this day. Some people lost multiple family members from different generations, brothers and sisters, parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren. Many were butchered and tortured in the most barbaric way. Our son was shot at 9:01am while his head was out of the tank after he and his brave Tzevet Perez did all they could to save their fellow soldiers of the Nachal Oz base and the members of the adjacent *kibbutz* bearing the same name. At the time that we will hopefully be taking out the Torah this year and dancing in the morning of Simchat Torah, we will be thinking about what happened that exact moment precisely one year before.

How can we celebrate both the completion of the Torah and at the same time commemorate the pain of loss?

We have shown through the course of this article that in general, and during our great festivals of Rosh Hashanah and Pesach in particular, celebrating both the birth of humanity and the birth of the Jewish people are built around the symbols of the *shofar* and the *matzah* – the celebration and crying, the suffering and salvation.

Life is somehow a package deal and we are called to draw upon superhuman strength when facing challenges. Ours is not a history littered only with great suffering but also punctuated with the greatest spiritual and moral moments in human history. We will need to draw on our deepest reservoirs of faith and strength to balance these strong conflicting emotions. Indeed, the Zohar calls the *matzah* of the month of Nissan and the *sukkah* of the month of Tishrei articles of faith: צִיָּא דְמִהִימְנוּתָא וְלִחְמָא דְמִהִימְנוּתָא.

In facing the enormous challenges ahead, we will need to dig very deep into the dual symbolism of the *matzah* and the *shofar*.

Days of Awe in Times of War

Our ancestors faced at times impossible challenges, and every time they somehow managed to find a way to bounce back. The exodus from Egyptian slavery; miraculously breaking the stranglehold of Sancheriv [Sennacherib], the siege of Jerusalem which threatened the entire city; surviving the Temple's destruction and ensuing exiles; rebuilding a sovereign Jewish state and the Torah world so soon after Auschwitz and returning to unite Jerusalem after the imminent threat of a second holocaust in 1967. Somehow each time we have bounced back and rebuilt the Jewish world. We cried and we sang, we ate the bread of suffering and salvation, we were exposed to the destructive elements of those who wished to destroy us, and we were protected by the divine clouds of glory. We always found a way.

When we somehow managed to get through the celebration of Yonatan's wedding with his brother Daniel missing, only 10 days after that tragic day, I understood the dichotomy of suffering and celebration. It helped me understand something we had just read during Sukkot in the book of *Kohelet* [Ecclesiastes]. King Solomon, the wisest of all men, highlights in chapter 3 that for every time, and every hour beneath the sun, there are different experiences: a time of life and a time of death, a time to plant and a time to uproot, time of peace and a time of war, time to mourn and a time to celebrate. I had always previously understood that Solomon was talking about different times in our lives. Life can be divided into good times and bad times – sometimes it's a time for happiness and growth. Sometimes, it's a time for mourning and destruction. I understood for the first time in my life that this is not necessarily the case. Perhaps King Solomon, in his great wisdom, was teaching us

that sometimes all of these things happen together. They literally happen at the same time. Life is a package deal.

More often than not, all of these things happen at the same time. Parts of our life are being planted and grown, and other parts are being uprooted and unraveled. In some parts of our lives, we have *shalom*, peace and harmony, and in others conflict, confrontation, and turmoil. We have so much blessing and so much to be grateful for, but at times so many curses and so many challenges.

At practically every wedding celebration there is also the pain of loss and hardship. Either a beloved close family member has passed away or perhaps there is debilitating or fatal illness being faced. Sometimes there are great challenges of *shalom bayit* and painful arguments tearing families apart. At the height of our happiness we need to put in the background these painful challenges to allow ourselves to appreciate the moment of gratitude and celebration. We are often called upon to juggle these contrasting experiences and emotions. This is what we had to do as a family at Yonatan's wedding, and this is what many other families have had to do as they forge ahead a life with so much pain and loss. This is what our people is called upon to do time and time again.

Many hostages still need to return home. Our son needs to be buried. Many of us live with anxiety as our children are on the front lines. And many of us seek comfort. As we enter 5785 we know that this year ahead has many question marks. We face many challenges, not only in Gaza, but in the north, and in the east where the roots of the Iranian evil lurks.

This Simchat Torah, we are going to have it both ways. We will dance with every fiber of our being, celebrating the privilege of be-

ing a Jew and at the same time, we will cry, yearn, and feel the pain of this last year and what happened last year at this time.

עַתָּה קִפּוּד וְעַתָּה רִקּוּד – it will be both a time to mourn and a time to dance. A time to feel the pain and a time to celebrate the privilege. A time to laugh and a time to cry. A time to feel close and a time to yearn from a distance.

We live in Hashem's world. In Hashem's world somehow things are always okay, even when they are not.

NOTES

1. With special thanks to my friend and colleague Rav Zvi Elon, the head of World Bnei Akiva, for highlighting for me the deeper meaning of *shever* in Tanach.
2. Sefat Emet, Devarim 5647.
3. With special thanks to my friend and colleague Rav Yoed Aharoni (Rosh Yeshiva of Tzviya Boys High School in Yad Binyamin where Daniel and Yonatan studied in their first year in Israel) who enlightened me about this insight.

The Ram's Horn

A Weapon of War

One of the things that always fascinates me about the *shofar* is that it is the horn of an animal (Mishnah, *Rosh Hashanah* 3:2; Yehoshua 6:5). The horn chosen by our sages for the *mitzvah* of *shofar* is that of a ram which is most certainly a weapon.

The ram uses its horn to protect itself and ward off any threats. It is the hardest part of the animal, it's pointy and dangerous, and can injure or even kill another creature in encounters. It batters and bruises. So much so that the English word to 'ram' into someone or something comes from the aggressive act of bashing that the ram does with its horns. The *shofar* is the inner hollow of the horn and the tough bone exterior is the weapon.

The shofar and the battering ram

This is why the Romans called their critical weapon of antiquity a battering ram. The only way that walled cities of yesteryear could be conquered was by breaching the walls of the city. Once the wall was breached, the invading army could enter and it was only a matter of time before the city was overrun. It is for this reason that we fast on

the 17th of Tammuz only three weeks before the actual destruction of the Temple – penetrating the walls is the first inevitable step to destroying the city. But walls are made of stone and really difficult to penetrate and hence the way through was to break the large city gates made of wood. It was the battering ram that was created to repeatedly ram the city gates until eventually breaking through.

Doesn't it seem so odd and strange that such a militant instrument of aggression should be singled out as the instrument of Divine mercy? That the day of judgment at the beginning of the year should focus on a horn used for battle?

Furthermore, the *shofar*, like the trumpet, was often used in a time of war. It was used to warn the people that they needed to gather together to defend themselves against an impending enemy.

War or peace?

What makes this so strange is that striving for *shalom* – peace and harmony – in the world is the pinnacle of our prayers. We complete the Silent Prayer three times a day with a prayer for *shalom* – *Sim shalom* or *Shalom rav*. We complete every *kaddish* with a double prayer for *shalom* – *Yehei shlama raba* and *Oseh shalom*. Part of the Jewish laws of war is that no declaration of war can take place without first exhausting all options of peace.¹ We greet each other with *shalom* which means both hello and goodbye. *Shalom* – a desire for a peaceful and harmonious living could not be more central in Judaism. We pray for world peace and harmony throughout the prayers of the *Yamim Nora'im* [High Holy Days] so how can it be that such an instrument of aggression was chosen as the symbol of the day?

As long as evil exists in the world, there is unfortunately a need for war. Evil wishes to dominate, to bring darkness, death, and destruction to the world. Evil prevails in the world especially when good people do nothing. From Haman to Hitler, raw animalistic impulses of brutish instinctiveness and brutality threaten the lives of millions in every generation. If the ram had no horns, it would be indefensible. And in the world of animalistic drives, it has to defend itself.

Israel and Amalek – dethroning or throning G-d?

Unfortunately, as long as there is evil, there have to be armies used to defend ourselves against this evil. On October 7th, we got woken from our slumber of the mistaken concept that perhaps we no longer needed a large and strong army. Israel for years was living under the conception of a small and smart army, one of digital defense, and less of the machinations of a conventional standing army needed to repel evil.

We had the most horrific, rude awakening on Simchat Torah: We are surrounded by vicious enemies who wish to destroy us and will stop at nothing. We need to have the strength of the ram with every possible weapon to defend ourselves against such evil. We need not just a small and smart army, but we also need a large, strong, and courageous one to face the challenges of confronting evil.

Rosh Hashanah is the coronation of Hashem, reminding ourselves of the world we would like to live in, a world created by G-d and a world called upon to live according to the values of G-d, G-dliness and goodness. There are, unfortunately, forces who wish to dethrone G-d and good, who refuse to live in a kingdom of heaven.

The verses are explicit when it comes to Amalek, that the aim of Amalek is exactly this, to dethrone G-d.

The verse says that the reason that there is an eternal war between G-d and Amalek, is that their hand is on the throne of G-d:

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי יָד עַל כִּסֵּי-ה' מִלְחָמָה לְה' בְּעַמֶּלֶק מִדֹּר דָּר.

“And he said, for the hand is on the throne of G-d, there is a war between G-d and Amalek in every generation” (Shemot [Exodus] 17:16).

What is clear is that both the words ‘throne’ and ‘G-d’ appear not in their entirety – throne is *kisei* כִּסֵּי but appears as *keis* כִּי, missing the *aleph*, and G-d’s name appears as a *yud* and a *hey*, and not as the full name of Hashem. Our sages explain that this is because the evil and diabolical focus of Amalek is to dethrone G-d and to ensure that His values are not complete in the world.

Part of the coronation of G-d is the need to rid the world of evil, because as long as there is evil in the world, good cannot prevail.

We know that Amalek as a people no longer exists. Indeed since the Assyrian global conquest of Sancheriv [Sennacherib] and his population intermingling strategy, our sages highlight that the nations of antiquity by and large no longer exist – Moabites, Babylonians, Arameans, Midianites, etc. are no longer (*Yadayim* 4:4).

Rav Soloveitchik explains that Amalek as a people no longer exists but the perverse and immoral ideology at its core does. Absolute evil for the sake of evil tragically still does. This is the Amalakite ideology which must be remembered, never forgotten, and combated.

Whose responsibility is it to combat Amalek according to the Torah? According to most opinions, it is that of the king. In other words, it is a collective *mitzvah* incumbent on the political leader-

ship of a sovereign Jewish state – the king (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of War 1:1). Dealing with the scourge of collective global and regional evil requires the trappings of statehood. Only as a sovereign state with an economy and a military can we begin to contend with such evil.

Having a Jewish state today has unfortunately awoken the antisemitic Amalek-type of Jew-hatred. At the same time it has afforded us the opportunity to combat this cruel and barbaric oppression.

Terrorism – Amalek-type ideology today

Amalek-type evil has taken on a new name – terrorism. International terrorism aims to do exactly what its name implies: to terrorize people anywhere and everywhere. The acceptable international norm in military interaction is that an army confronts another, and only combatants in uniform fight against their counterparts. Civilians are beyond the pale of ideological and military conflict. An Amalek mindset operates differently. It is specifically the non-combatants who are the aim of their terror.

Hamas and Hezbollah terrorize Israeli civilians just getting on with their lives, as do terrorists the world over. 9/11 showed us just what warped minds of terror could conjure up – there seems to be no limit to immoral perversion.

These warped minds have taken the targeting of defenseless civilians even further – they have no care for their own civilians. Hamas, diabolically, has not built even one bomb shelter in Gaza! Israel builds bomb shelters in every home and public space to protect their civilians while Hamas couldn't care less about theirs. Hamas builds hundreds of miles of tunnels to protect their militant and

murderous terrorists while abandoning their own civilians. Israel sees its holiest military mission to defend and protect its civilians, while Hamas sees its mission as one that requires it to sacrifice hers for the sake of military aims. Israel protects its hospitals, schools, kindergartens, and old age homes at all costs, while Hamas sacrifices its sick, students, elderly, and young to protect her soldiers. The immoral and repugnant inversion of basic morality has the fingerprints of Amalekite-type evil. The regime of Hamas has lost its moral *raison d'être*.

Iran today is the greatest supporter of international terror and has its own diabolical aspirations for nuclear hegemony. How Iran can get away with openly having stated that the purpose of its nuclear weapons will be to eradicate Israel and is still somehow not unequivocally sanctioned and stands to be accepted in the family of nations boggles the moral mind. Iran and its Ayatollahs are the engine behind regional terror and beyond, and their drive and support led directly to the October 7th massacre.

We are now living in a post-October 7th Simchat Torah era, certainly the most significant Jewish event to date in my lifetime thus far. Not only on a personal level, as our son Daniel *Hy"d* was killed in the defense of Nachal Oz and, as of the writing of these lines, is still held captive in Gaza. But on a collective level too – everything seems to have changed. The worst pogrom since the *Shoah* [Holocaust] took place under our noses in an independent Jewish state with the strongest and most technologically advanced military in the region. The unthinkable happened – an invasion in 90 different places, and astoundingly it took place almost 50 years to the day when we were caught totally by surprise by our enemies on a hal-

lowed Jewish holiday.² The barbarism would have made the most diabolical of human perpetrators of evil through the ages exceptionally proud. The indescribable barbarism and brutality; the indiscriminate death and destruction; the rape, burning, and torture boggles the mind. The taking of over 250 human hostages – Jew and gentile alike, children and grandparents, men and women, soldiers and civilians, dead or alive – is amongst the most despicable of all human acts.

Amalek and Hamas

It is this total disregard for human freedom and dignity which is the very meaning of the word *חַמָּס* in the Torah and the reason for the decimation of human society with the flood in Noah's time. Describing the despicable moral decline of the generation about to lose their moral *raison d'être*, the Torah (Bereishit [Genesis] 6:11) states “וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חַמָּס, the world was filled with *hamas*,” normally translated as violent robbery. Incredibly the Targum Onkelos, one of the most ancient commentaries on the Torah, translates *חַמָּס* as *חַטּוּפִין* – taking hostages! Systemically stealing others' property ruins the foundation of justice and property ownership. Violently stealing people, denying them basic human freedom and dignity against their will in sub-prison conditions with the intention of trading them as human traffickers, is irredeemably despicable. It is this which caused that generation of the flood to lose their right to exist, and it is Hamas who now have lost any moral right to exist as a regime and to ever govern a society again.

“Like the legions of the house of David”

The theme of war is also one that appears in one of the central themes of the day – judgment.

In the haunting *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer we say: “All people pass before You (Hashem) as *bnei Maron*.” This line is based on the Mishnah (*Rosh Hashanah* 1:2) that every individual passes before G-d “כַּבְּנֵי מְרוֹן, as *bnei Maron*.”

This expression is unusual and not easily understood – what does it mean?

The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a) gives three possible explanations. The first one is “like sheep,” highlighting that every individual passes before G-d as a sheep inspected by the owner – one by one. The second interpretation is that it refers to “the ascent of the Maron Mountain” with dangerous, narrow, single-file paths, highlighting both the individuality of judgment and the precariousness of our lives. The final fascinating explanation is that it refers to “the soldiers or legions of the house of David.” Just as a soldier stands in single file before the commander, and each one is inspected in their uniform to be impeccable before the commander, so everyone stands before the King of kings, like the soldiers of David.

It seems that the three explanations highlight three elements of our individual judgment before G-d. “Like sheep” emphasizes our helplessness in judgment – there is nothing we can do at that moment, as what we have done until this moment is now being rigorously assessed. “The mountain ascent” analogy highlights the precariousness of life and judgment and how our lives hang in the balance. The final interpretation of soldiers also highlights individual precariousness and danger – soldiers are about to risk their lives

in battle.

However, soldiers could not be more different from sheep and mountain climbers. Sheep are passive and follow, whereas soldiers are proactive protagonists. Mountain climbers avoid danger, but soldiers are emissaries of the King and country who fight with every fiber in their being to change reality. They stand against those who wish them harm, never accepting their fate, but always trying to shift the destiny of their people. None more so than the heroic soldiers of King David's army.

As precarious as judgment is, we can do something about it – we can repent, return, and change our ways. Yes, we are victims of certain circumstances that we cannot change, but there is much we can always change. There are many battles in which we can be victors – transforming fate into destiny.

There is evil in the world and we need to confront it. We live in a time of war, facing a battle on seven fronts. We need to combat this and do everything to ensure that the values of G-dliness and goodness prevail. Hashem in His infinite wisdom charged Israel with a moral mission which has irked the hatred of those who trade in barbarism and inhumanity. Amalek and those throughout the generations inspired by her perverse immortality have locked themselves in a perennial battle of evil against good. Of a culture of death, destruction and hostage taking against one of life, love and hope. Of those who wish to dethrone G-d and desecrate the image of G-d against those who wish to coronate G-d and sanctify life.

Against our inbuilt desire for *shalom* and our deep desire to live in peace and harmony with all, we have been thrust into a war that none of us want or wish. May Hashem grant that the blasts of the

ram's horn be a clarion call for courage and fortitude; self-sacrifice and resilience to face this evil together.

The ram of mercy

May the cry of the ram's horn evoke His mercy and the memory on High of the ram of the Binding of Isaac. May it evoke Abraham and Isaac's willingness to sacrifice and be sacrificed for the sake of G-d. May Hashem remember Sarah's tragic death as result of her knowledge of this traumatic trial of her son. May Hashem remember the millions who have sacrificed themselves and their unimaginable suffering for His sake and who have clung unswervingly to our Divine mission. May Hashem remember the pain, the tears and the suffering of all those who gave their lives for Him on the 7th of October and throughout this year.

May 5785 be a year of great Divine mercy. To return every one of our hostages soonest, bring healing to the wounded, comfort those mourning and protect all soldiers, civilians and communities around the world.

NOTES

1. Rambam and Ramban agree that the Torah's call for *shalom* before going out to war applies to every type of war.
2. The Yom Kippur War began on October 6, 1973.

Choosing the World We Live In

Rosh Hashanah, Simcha and Sukkot

There is one element of free choice that no one can ever take away from us and that is our ability to choose our thoughts.

As much as we have free choice, others can take away from us almost every freedom. We can be forced into situations where there is nothing we can do. We can be gagged and bound, Heaven forbid, be rendered unable to speak or act. But no human being can ever force us to think something we don't want to think. We have absolute free choice to choose our attitude in every given situation.

Viktor Frankl and the final human freedom

This is one of the great insights into the human condition that emerges from Viktor Frankl's masterpiece, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl writes that no one can tell him as a survivor of the concentration camps that a human being does not have free choice. He says that he witnessed people in their last moments stealing another

er person's piece of bread in order to survive. Yet, incredibly he witnessed others who literally give away their last piece of bread. This, he maintains, provides unequivocal evidence of a human being's capacity to choose a course of action even in impossible circumstances. He says that whether we become angels or animals, saints or sinners, it is entirely up to us.¹ Indeed our sages have famously said that "everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven." This has been interpreted by many of our great ethicists to mean that everything that happens to us can be beyond our choice and control except our "fear of Heaven"² – how we choose to react to what happens to us.

So many circumstances, as we know all too well, happen without us having any choice or control – they are forced upon us. But one thing can never be taken away and that is our fear of Heaven. We can always choose our attitude.

When we face challenges in life that shake our world, we have to dig very deeply into our reservoirs of faith and perspective. Vulnerability and excruciating pain need not necessarily beget paralysis or anger, blame or harsh criticism – there is nothing automatic about these responses. As Stephen Covey has said in his *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: between stimulus and response there is a gap and we live in that gap.³ The things that happen to us – stimuli – need not elicit any automatic uncontrolled response. We have free choice to dig deep within ourselves and to choose our perspective on what happens to us and then to choose our attitude, response, and course of action. To try, despite the pain, to choose a path of hope and healing, light and life. Faith and beliefs impact perception which in turn impact our actions and performance. We indeed see

the world not the way it is but the way we are.

My mental gamble and ‘hostage deal’ with myself

Having gone through the horrific 163 days of our son being a hostage and thought to be alive, we were full of fear and angst – amongst the most harrowing situations in life. This tested us in a way that nothing previously had. Then, the knowledge that Daniel had been murdered, with his lifeless body held somewhere in Gaza. Just to find the strength to live each day by putting one foot in front of the other required all our inner reserves of strength and resilience to somehow face the valley of death with faith, hope, and positivity. There is a need every day to choose how to confront this challenging reality.

I felt this so acutely, particularly during those 163 painful days. How is one to cope with the knowledge that one’s son is being held by Hamas and heaven only knows what they are undergoing? Are they, G-d forbid, being tortured? Is he injured or even alive? When and will we see him again? How is one to handle such impossible thoughts about the fate of one’s beloved child? I realized very quickly that if I am unable to be intentional and proactive about my thoughts, they will get the better of me, paralyze and destroy me.

I needed to up my game and do everything I could to think correctly and create the mental paradigm that I wanted to try to live in. I, thankfully, with the grace of G-d, was able to develop the following mind game that I played with myself each and every day. I said to myself as follows: There is a chance that Daniel did not survive the first day of the tank battle and that would mean, G-d forbid, that he is no longer alive. If that is the case, that means I have nothing to

worry about – he is not being tortured. They cannot harm him. If it is true that, G-d forbid, he is deceased, then I have a lifetime of loss and mourning to contend with. But I need not worry about that at all now, because hopefully he is alive. If on the other hand, he is alive, then please G-d, we have so much hope and we will, *b'ezrat Hashem* [with G-d's help], see him again.

The choice to view reality as the glass half-full is our choice, and our choice alone. It is possible to see the emptiness and pain of both sides of the equation, that he is, G-d forbid, either dead or being tortured. But one can choose to do one's best to think differently – that if he is alive, we will, please G-d, see him again. And if, G-d forbid, he has died, then he is not in harm's way and has died *al kiddush Hashem* [lit. for the sanctification of G-d, as a holy martyr].

This is a choice, an almost impossible one. I have come to believe that Hashem gives us seemingly impossible tests to face. Yet, somehow, at the same time, He gives us impossible strength to deal with them.

Rosh Hashanah – head of the year

This is exactly the spiritual focus of Rosh Hashanah – the first of the Days of Teshuva, expressed in the very name of this festival. The Hebrew word our sages have chosen for the New Year is *Rosh Hashanah* – the “*Head of the Year*” – and not the more obvious term *Reishit Hashanah*, the “*Beginning of the Year*.”⁴

The reason our sages picked this specific term – the head – is because the head and mind are the keys to understanding the essence of the day.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of deep cognitive reflection – not a

time of action. We examine our spiritual and mental paradigms and thought processes in preparation for the year ahead. It's a time for big-picture mind-mapping – not meddling in minutiae, in specific actions. It is, for this reason, we remarkably do not focus whatsoever on individual actions nor *any* mention of sin or confession throughout the lengthy prayer service. Although part of the essence of *teshuva* is confession⁵ as we do throughout the *selichot* prayers of penitence and hundreds of times throughout Yom Kippur – we astoundingly do not utter one word of confession on Rosh Hashanah! We dare not get lost in the detail, lest we fail to distinguish the woods from the trees. It's not time “to rearrange deck chairs on the Titanic,” but rather to ensure that we are heading in the right direction. Rosh Hashanah is an intense exercise in systematic strategic spiritual thinking.

It is a time to challenge the very way we see the world. Just as “seeing is believing” so too “believing is seeing” – what we think and believe causes us to see our reality in a certain way. If we cannot conceive of ourselves differently then we cannot chart a different course of action. How we examine ourselves in thought on Rosh Hashanah will determine the type of atonement in action on Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is a day when we create in thought the conceptual reality for the world we choose to live in.⁶

If you think you live in a world of curse – you do!

One of the clearest and most compelling examples of both the remarkable power of thought, as well as its decisive spiritual value is an incredible verse we read in the *parasha* [Torah portion] of Ki Tavo. In the middle of the horrific תּוֹכַחַת – the lengthy rebuke and

curses if *Bnei Yisrael* doesn't keep the Torah – there emerges a critical verse as to the source of the curses – a total game changer in terms of the real root of the curses:

“And all these curses will befall you, and will pursue you and overtake you until they destroy you because you did not obey the L-rd your G-d, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. And they shall be for you as a sign and a wonder, and upon your seed forever. Because you did not serve the L-rd your G-d with happiness and with gladness of heart, when you had an abundance of everything.” (Devarim 28:45–47)

It would have made more sense to have a **full stop** (period) after the words “Because you did not serve the L-rd your G-d.” After all, the opening verse to the curses clearly states that the reason the curses transpire is when we don't serve G-d – not obeying the Torah and not observing the commandments (Devarim 28:15). Yet the verse here clearly adds another component as to the reason the curses happen – only if we do not serve G-d with an attitude of happiness and a feeling of abundant blessing!

This changes everything.

It is not the lack of fulfilling the *mitzvot* alone which is the root of the curses. It turns out that serving G-d devoid of **any** feeling of happiness and hope, joy and blessing is indeed not really service of G-d according to Judaism. It is foreign to the DNA of Torah Judaism and Jewish life.

To put it differently – if we think that we live in a world of curse, then we do. No amount of objective blessing in our lives can convince a person with a mindset of curse that indeed they are blessed. If they view the world through a lens of curse, הַצָּר הַזֶּה – a nega-

tive and critical eye – all they will see is a mirror reflection of what they believe. On the other hand, if one views the world and people through a prism of an עֵינַי טוֹבָה, a positive perspective, they will have an attitude of gratitude, see graciousness around them, and constantly judge others favorably. If we believe we are blessed, then we truly are. If we believe that we live in a world of blessings, then we do.

This requires great mindfulness and self-awareness. It requires paying great attention to our thought patterns, mental conditioning, and the subconscious voices in our heads. We need to carefully think about the way we think and ought to analyze our emotional default positions, childhood wounds, and defense mechanisms. This can only happen through deep self-reflection and proactively choosing to engage in constructive and wholesome thought analysis. Meditative prayer, seeking mentorship, cognitive therapy, and gratitude practices can all contribute to rewiring our thought patterns and subsequently influencing our reality.

Simcha as a state of being

What emerges clearly from this verse is that happiness is not a transient emotion or a destination to be pursued but rather a **state of being**. The more one lives in sync with one's core values the more happiness finds us. Happiness is a natural result of living life the way it should be lived – of being the people we ought to be. Happiness cannot be a destination but is rather a result of the journey of an inspired life process.

It is this very state of being, says Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, that we ultimately hope to be blessed with on Sukkot.⁷ After all,

only this holiday is defined in our prayers as זמן שמחתנו – the time of our happiness.⁸ Additionally, it is the only holiday where we find the unusual expression of *simcha*: “וְהָיִיתָ אֶתְּךָ שִׂמְחָה”, You should be *only* happy,” implying a type of complete or ultimate happiness.⁹ What is the meaning of this phrase? Rav Hirsch explains that it refers to a state of being, a mindset that we hope to achieve having been celebrating in G-d’s presence in the Temple precinct for the entire seven days.

The Malbim¹⁰ states that this is the very meaning of the word שמחה in Tanach as opposed to ששון. These are the two primary expressions of joy in the Bible, and they have distinct meanings. ששון is an expression of external, celebratory joy, whereas שמחה is a more internal and ongoing sense of joy – a state of being.

Happiness can be transformed into a character trait, a permanent quality, and a joie de vivre that accompanies us throughout our lives. It is this state of being that we hope to take with us into the long, rainy winter months. Indeed it can only be this mindset that will successfully see us through the ‘winter periods’ of life, the difficult and dark times.

Simchat Torah came last year with so much horror that we are still reeling from today. This Simchat Torah will commemorate 1,300 yearzeits of death, destruction, and hostage-taking. It will be accompanied with much pain and challenge.

We do, though, live in Hashem’s world, not ours. “Even when I walk in the valley of death, I will not fear evil, because You are with me” (Tehillim [Psalms] 23:4). King David who faced danger and challenge more than most was convinced that G-d was with him and he would somehow prevail.

We live in His world

In His world, there is hope in the face of despair; light in the face of darkness. That somehow, even if we don't understand, everything is for the best. When we are broken we are whole and when we are fractured we are complete. Even when things are so not okay, they are okay. The flimsy *sukkah* is called in the Zohar “the shadow of faith.” It is but a whisper and a shadow, but with faith in Hashem and Jewish destiny, with conviction in the justness of our cause, we can weather any storm and not only survive but thrive.

On Rosh Hashanah, we have to decide what type of world we choose to live in. On Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah we celebrate that, notwithstanding all our pain and challenges, we can always choose to live with hope and happiness.

We have to choose in Whose world we live.

NOTES

1. *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, pp. 65–66.
2. *Berachot* 33b, *Megillah* 25a, *Niddah* 16b.
3. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*, Stephen R. Covey, p.70.
4. *Reishit* is the obvious word as it is not only the first word in the Torah – *Bereishit* (“In the beginning”) – but it is also mentioned in Devarim [Deuteronomy] (11:12) as “the beginning of the year” – *Reishit Hashanah*. It is from here the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 17b) learns the concept of annual judgment on Rosh Hashanah. Nevertheless, our sages chose Rosh Hashanah as the name of the festival and the Talmudic tractate.
5. Rambam in his introduction to the *Laws of Teshuva* sees the source of the *mitzvah* of *teshuva* in תשובה – confession.
6. Clear support for this perspective of Rosh Hashanah can be found in the writ-

Days of Awe in Times of War

ing of Rabbeinu Tam of the *Ba'alei HaTosafot*. He states that the world was created in *thought* in Tishrei and physically in Nissan (*Rosh Hashanah* 27a). This is how he resolves the discrepancy between both Tishrei and Nissan being times of creation according to our Talmudic sages (*Rosh Hashanah* 10). First the world is created in thought, a vision of the world – its ideal potential. Thereafter, in Nissan, it is created in reality. Clearly, the focus of Rosh Hashanah is therefore in the realm of thought. Just as the world was created in thought and potential, so too the service of the day is one of thought – to create the conceptual reality of our world.

7. Rav Hirsch's commentary on Devarim 16:15.
8. Of the three times in the Torah that *simcha* (joy) is mentioned in connection with a holiday, two are about Sukkot.
9. The simple meaning of the verse refers to Sukkot. Rashi quotes the Talmudic commentary in *Sukkot* 48a which connects it to the last day of *chag* – Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah. This day (days in the Diaspora), when there are no particular *mitzvot* such as sitting in the *sukkah* or waving the *lulav*, seems to be the crescendo and pinnacle of our happiness. We simply celebrate being in G-d's presence alone and are most primed to achieve this level of ultimate happiness.
10. Rabbi Meir Leibush. He mentions this distinction in a number of places, for example, see Yeshayahu [Isaiah] 35:1, in his section on the meaning of words.

The Blame Game

On Yom Kippur, Atonement and Achieving Unity

One of the most foundational ideas in all of Judaism is that of personal responsibility.

We have great responsibility for the direction that our lives take. Yes, not everything is in our power, and many things are beyond our control – life is indeed vulnerable and at times precarious.

At the same time though, there is so much within the ambit of our free choice. So much so that the Rambam mentions the principle of free choice at the heart of his Laws of Repentance.

G-d cannot hold human beings responsible at all for their actions if they don't have free choice to choose the course of their actions. Since part of the essence of being a human being, created in the image of G-d, is having free choice, we therefore are held responsible for our actions in general and over the High Holy Days in particular. Such is the nature of the Ten Days of Repentance, where we do all we can to shift our mindset and our actions for the year ahead.

We all know that the last Simchat Torah, on October 7th, was arguably the greatest failure of Israel in its 76-year history. Certainly, the events, as we all know, were the worst for *Am Yisrael*, both in quantity, in numbers, and in brutality, since the Shoah. The army, intelligence agencies, political leadership, and indeed all of Israel were caught by surprise.

Who is the culprit?

Who is to blame for this terrible occurrence? Is it perhaps Israel's military intelligence? For sure they have significant responsibility. Is it perhaps the Shin Bet, Israel's internal spy agency? Surely too. Is it the heads of the army – the chief of staff and maybe even the whole general staff? There is some responsibility. Is it also the political leadership? Perhaps the minister of defense, the prime minister, and maybe all of the cabinet? Makes some sense. Is it perhaps all the previous chiefs of staff who developed a military doctrine of having a small and smart army based on defense and technology and not a large and strong army based on strength and deterrence? Is it perhaps a shortcoming shared across Israeli society of a desire for peace and quiet and to kick the can down the road, as opposed to being prepared to face head on the viciousness of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran's intransigence? Are we all perhaps to blame in some way and bear some level of responsibility?

Is Hashem perhaps to blame? After all, is He not a just G-d and one of divine mercy, Whose mercy we seek especially at this time? How does He allow such bad things to happen to such good people? How does He allow wicked to prosper in the words of Jeremiah?

Who is to blame?

There, of course, does need to be a national inquiry into what happened.

After the Yom Kippur War, the chief of staff and head of military intelligence were held responsible and resigned. Prime Minister Golda Meir, although not held directly responsible by the commission, resigned eventually too. Here too, there ought to be an inquiry as we can't continue with 'business as usual'. Having said that, if there isn't a committee where there is broad consensus and trust of the decision-makers, then the findings will be controversial and will create more mistrust and division. Listening to politicians and pundits alike, everybody seems to know exactly who is to blame. And one thing is clear to them: it is for sure not them or their ideological or political group. Even those who take some measure of responsibility, place the predominant blame on others – on the ideologies and character traits or impure motives of their ideological or political rivals.

The power of confession

We seem to be exceptional at pointing fingers at others and not as comfortable to take personal responsibility. We all know that the *vidui* confession is that we pound our own heart as a physical sign of taking personal responsibility and an expression of heartfelt remorse and regret.

Our sages, through the power of confession, place the responsibility first and foremost on ourselves. We shouldn't be 'pounding' other people's chests, blaming, externalizing and criticizing others. Rather we ought to be banging our own chest, looking inward,

owning our part and taking personal responsibility to do better. It requires great humility to own our part. The essence of the days of *teshuvah* in general, and Yom Kippur in particular, is the principle of absolute personal responsibility. During Elul and in the days of *selichot* leading up to the Days of Awe that is what we do. Its pinnacle, of course, is Yom Kippur where we spend major time and energy on confessing our misgivings.

In order for repentance to take place, there has to first and foremost be a deep internal look at oneself, an admission of guilt, an expression of remorse, and a desire to do things differently in the future.

All of us on some level bear some responsibility and we need to take a deep look at ourselves. It is well-known – and this I heard from leaders of the security establishment – from documents found in Sinwar’s house, that the reason he felt he would succeed in his attack on October 7th was the terrible internal division within Israel. He saw our society as weak, imploding within itself, and therefore judged it an opportune time to attack.

In my opinion, a significant part of this weakness has been the inability of each side to own its part in the issues roiling Israeli society. We are crystal clear on the roles and responsibilities of others and what they can do differently, and murky when it comes to examining our role. Criticism, disqualification, delegitimization, and demonizing are so common in our rhetoric that they often deafen our ability to look inward. Growth and healing cannot take place without each side looking inward and taking its own personal responsibility.

This is the foundational truth behind the famous story of Rab-

bi Elazar ben Dordaya, who was one of the most infamous sinners in Israel. When he decided to repent, the Talmud (*Avoda Zara* 17a) tells us how he appealed to anyone and everyone to intercede on his behalf, to the heavens, to the earth, to the seas, to everyone but himself. When he realized that none would do so, he finally reached the haunting conclusion: This issue depends fully on me. When he was able to take full personal responsibility, he was then able to find grace and favor before G-d. Indeed in his inimitable words: “אין הַדְּבָרִי אֶלֶּא בִּי תַלְוִי אֶלֶּא בִּי”⁷, This issue (of repentance) depends entirely on me.”

So simple, yet so profound.

Hashem forgives those who forgive

Our Jewish and Israeli society is in desperate need of leaders and citizens alike to look inward, spew less criticism, and take more responsibility. Indeed, these days of awe and judgment contain a foundational principle of how we are judged. Time and time again, our sages call upon us to judge others favorably. To go out of our way to take personal responsibility for our lives and to judge others favorably and mercifully. We seem to do it the other way round. We are forgiving to ourselves, absolving responsibility, and then harshly criticizing others without mercy.

This is exactly the opposite of spiritually sensitized living. So much so that our sages teach in many places a transformative teaching – we ourselves are judged by G-d in the same way we judge others.

The Talmudic sage Rava learns this from the 13 Attributes of Divine Mercy:

Rav says: “Anyone who forgoes his traits of exactitude (i.e., is

forgiving to others), all of their sins are forgiven. As it is stated (Mi-cha 7:18): '(Hashem) Who forgives iniquity and forgoes sin' – To whom does G-d forgive iniquity? To the person who forgives the sins of others." (*Rosh Hashanah 17a*)

This is a powerful insight and a critical lesson especially at the time of judgment.

The lesson is simple – if we want G-d to judge us favorably and forgive our mistakes, G-d has a clear litmus test for us – how do we judge others and do we forgive *them*?!

It seems to be rather disingenuous to request of G-d to be merciful to us and to see the mitigating circumstances, when we cannot do that for others.

We are indeed judged in the way we judge others.

Our society is in desperate need of each and every one of us, and especially all the leaders of every ideological group and political party, to judge others mercifully, forgivingly and favorably. To look inward piercingly and harshly, and to take responsibility for what each one of us personally and collectively can do for the future of Israel.

If we do not take personal responsibility for the part we played in the fraying of societal cohesion, then we cannot move forward.

The blame game causes a destructive downward spiral which can rot society to the core. Leadership can destroy a society or construct one. We are in desperate need today of a mode of leadership which sees the internal cohesion of our people as arguably the number one national prerogative.

No doubt the maniacal threat of a nuclear Iran is our greatest external threat, however, undoubtedly our greatest internal threat

is divisiveness and demonization which threaten our social fabric.

Davidian leadership

We are in desperate need of leaders who can heal, who, despite the enormous and genuine ideological differences, can bridge the divide with an unshakable sense of common fate and collective destiny. This has to be the prime goal, since we are a historic community with unshakable bonds of *ahavat Yisrael* [love of our fellow Jews] and mutual concern and responsibility.

To my mind, the most important and transformational political leader in the history of the Jewish people was King David. It is worth reflecting on David's leadership of remarkable strength and fortitude to face external enemies, but at the same time, his unmatched forbearance and forgiveness facing his internal political foes.

What was the hallmark of David's great leadership legacy?

It lies in his remarkable attitude to his political enemies – his forgiveness and tolerance of those who not only vehemently opposed him but went out of their way to harm him. Somehow he possessed the strength and humility not only to forgive them but to proactively seek to unite with them and the tribes of Israel they represented.

At the heart of this unusual quality lies a coherent ideology of how a leader should treat their political enemies – those who are part of the same nation but are ideological opponents – with a deep desire to place national unity over tribal triumphalism; internal cohesion over partisan politics.

To best understand “Davidian” politics, it needs to be contrasted with the more commonplace type of Machiavellian politics which

couldn't be more different yet pervades much of the political interaction.

The hallmark of Machiavellian politics lies in the vengeful and destructive way in which one treats one's political enemies. This mode of behavior has a cogent philosophical basis. It is rooted in an uncouth, un-Jewish mode of political interaction, in which lying and deception are virtues, undermining political opponents is desirable, and political ends always trump moral means – Machiavellianism is indeed a systematic political philosophy.

Machiavellian politics

A 16th century statesman and diplomat, Niccolo Machiavelli served his native Florence in Italy for 14 years. In retirement he wrote works of history and drama, but his lasting notoriety is due to his most famous work, *The Prince*.

In this watershed work, which ultimately established him as the “father of political science,” Machiavelli drew upon his personal experiences and political studies to argue that politics has always been conducted with deception, treachery, and criminality. Machiavelli maintained that successful politicians should not abide by normal standards of morality and ethics. For successful politicians, the desired end always justifies the means, no matter how brutal or unethical. Rulers who hope to maintain their hold on power must know no moral limits. They must lie and deceive as needed, and should torment, torture and murder political enemies with impunity if they wish to secure and sustain their leadership. Most famously, he notes that for a ruler, “it is much safer to be feared than loved.”

In the decades after it was published, *The Prince* gained a fiend-

ish reputation. By the end of the century, Shakespeare was using the term “Machiavel” to denote amoral opportunists, leading directly to our popular use of “Machiavellian” as a synonym for scheming villainy. Throughout the book, Machiavelli appears entirely unconcerned with morality, except insofar as it is helpful or harmful to maintaining power.

Davidian vs. Machiavellian politics

Diametrically opposed to Machiavellian politics is the political leadership of King David – what we have called “Davidian politics.” During David’s 40-year rule, he modeled a form of leadership so transformative that he has become known to posterity as דָּוִד הַמֶּלֶךְ, King David, ‘the’ king par excellence. So extraordinary was his leadership that the longed-for, future leader of Israel, the Messiah himself, must be a direct descendant of David.

David’s respect for his political adversaries is remarkable, and could not be more different from Machiavelli’s ideal prince. While David was a warrior who fiercely fought the enemies of Israel, he was extraordinarily forgiving and consistently tolerant towards his political adversaries, a compassionate attitude his own senior military brass and tribal leadership struggled to understand.

On several occasions, King Saul attempted to kill his loyal servant David, yet David twice refrained from harming him, even though his own life was in danger and he had every right to kill King Saul in self-defense. David also showed remarkable forgiveness to Avner ben Ner and Amasa ben Yeter, chiefs of staff of the armies that fought against David on behalf of Saul’s kingdom and Avshalom’s rebel forces respectively. When Yoav surreptitiously murdered

these men, David rebuked Yoav for his actions and publicly mourned them. When the Amalakite youth and brothers Ba'ana and Reichav joyously informed David that they had killed his political enemies – King Saul and Ish-boshet – David had them killed for daring to harm an elected king of Israel.

The national unifier

What drove King David to show such unusual mercy to his political adversaries?

David understood that the main role of the king of Israel is to unite the people. David knew that killing Saul or taking vengeance against political enemies could lead to an irrevocable split amongst the already divided tribes of Israel. He desperately sought to overcome painful internal divisions between his tribe of Judah and the other tribes of Israel who appointed Saul and Ish-boshet as their kings. His lifelong goal was to heal the fractures of national society and forge a unified people.

The book of *Shmuel* [Samuel], which in many ways is the book of David, stands out as the blueprint for Jewish political leadership. It was David who bent over backwards to ignore prior insults, grievances and wars and to forgive others for the sake of unity, overcoming the tribalism that had plagued the people of Israel for generations. And so it was David who laid the foundations for the Temple in Jerusalem, where Hashem's presence could only reside among a people united as one.

Sukkot, Hakhel, and Jewish leadership

Rav Soloveitchik points out that the principle of being a unifier as

The Blame Game

the salient purpose of Jewish leadership can specifically be seen by the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*.¹ Every seven years the king was called upon, together with all the people of Israel, for a display of national unity as broad as possible in the precincts of the *Beit HaMikdash* [Temple]. There he was to read from the Torah and remind us all about our collective destiny. Rav Soloveitchik wonders why it is the king reading from the Torah and playing the central role in *Hakhel* – should it not be a religious leader, perhaps the *Kohen*? Yet specifically the king is called upon to gather the nation.

Rav Soloveitchik says, based on his interpretation of the Rambam's definition of the role of Jewish leadership, that the leader's job is first and foremost to unite the people. It is for this reason, he explains that the unusual expression regarding the appointment of a king that he has to be "from the midst of his people" means not only that he has to be born Jewish so that his fate has always been inextricably linked with these people, but specifically that he is a person "of the people and for the people," there to serve the people, to galvanize, and unify for the greater good.

In Israel, and indeed the world, today, we are in desperate need of the Davidian mode of Jewish leadership. The alternative is leading us to the abyss. Many countries like Israel are roiled by partisan, divisive politics with many drawn to extremes on both sides. Building a strong, broad, unifying national narrative is of critical importance. Contrast need not lead only to confrontation and conflict, but can and should be complementary. With some humility, differing opinions can even complete each other with space for both.

From Yom Kippur to Sukkot

The *sukkah* is a very broad tent which has room for many contrasting ideologies. Indeed King David's mode of leadership is called "the *sukkah* of David," as we say in Grace after Meals on Sukkot: "May the Merciful One rebuild the *sukkah* of David which has fallen." David's insistence on consensus amongst all the tribes created space for all parts of the nation. The road to the broad tent of Sukkot must pass through Yom Kippur – our Day of Atonement. The day is actually called in the Torah – *Yom HaKippurim* – the Day of Atonements in the plural. It seems that much atonement is needed – atonement between us and G-d, and between each community and individual human interactions.²

Only when every individual and community is able to look inward with authentic humility and introspection; with forgiveness and forbearance; with a deep sense of collective fate, can relationships be healed and mutual trust restored. The path to genuine acceptance and unity is then opened.

May 5785 be a year of unifying leadership from all parts of our people and indeed across the world. May we judge each other mercifully and favorably. May Hashem judge us all individually and together for a year of mercy, kindness, and Divine compassion.

NOTES

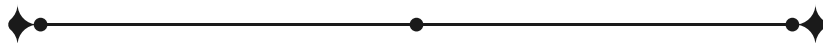
1. *Sefer Birkat Yitzchak* by Rabbi Menachem Genack, Parashat Shoftim; with thanks to Rabbi Josh Kahn for making me aware of this source.
2. Opinions of this plurality include between us and Hashem, as well as between each other. Some suggest that both the living and the deceased require atonement (see *Shulchan Aruch*, Orach Chaim 621:6, *Rama* and *Mishnah Berurah* ad loc.). We are all clearly in need of atonement.

מי שברך לחיילי צה"ל (מקוצר)

PRAYER FOR MEMBERS OF THE ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES (ABRIDGED)

מי שברך אבותינו אברהם יצחק ויעקב הוא יברך את חיילי צבא הגנה לישראל ואנשי כוחות הבטחון העומדים על משמר ארצנו וערי א-לקינו מגבול הלבנון ועד מדבר מצרים ומן הים הגדול עד לבוא הערבה ביפשה באויר ובים יתן ה' את אויבינו הקמים עלינו ונגפים לפנייהם הקדוש ברוך הוא ישמר ויציל את חיילינו מכל צרה וצוקה ומכל נגע ומחלה, וישלח ברכה והצלחה בכל מעשה ידיהם, ונאמר אמן.

He Who blessed our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, may He bless the members of the Israel Defense Forces and of the security services who stand guard over our land and the cities of our G-d from the border of the Lebanon to the desert of Egypt, and from the Great Sea to the approach of the Arahah, on the land, in the air, and on the sea. May Hashem cause the enemies who rise up against us to be struck down before them. May the Holy One, Blessed is He, preserve and rescue our fighters from every trouble and distress and from every plague and illness, and may He send blessing and success in their every endeavor. And let us say: Amen.



מי שברך לשבויים (מקוצר)

PRAYER FOR HOSTAGES (ABRIDGED)

מי שברך אבותינו אברהם יצחק ויעקב יוסף משה ואהרן דוד ושלמה, הוא יברך וישמר וינצר את אחינו בית ישראל השבויים, בעבור שאנו מתפללים בעבורם, הקדוש ברוך הוא ימלא רחמים עליהם, ישמרם מכל צרה וצוקה ומכל נגע ומחלה וישלח ברכה והצלחה בכל מעשה ידיהם, יוציאם מהשך וצלמות, וישיבם מהרה לחיק משפחותיהם, ונאמר אמן.

He who blessed our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, Yosef, Moshe and Aharon, David and Shlomo, may He bless, watch, and guard our brothers who are in captivity. On account of our praying for them, may the Holy One, Blessed is He grant mercy upon them, protect them from all trouble and sorrow, injury and illness, and send blessing and success in all they do, take them out from darkness and gloom, and speedily return them to the comfort of their families. And let us say: Amen.

About the Author



Rabbi Doron Perez serves as Executive Chairman of the Mizrahi World Movement and as head of the Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization.

Rabbi Perez was born and raised in South Africa, and immigrated to Israel at the age of 18. He studied in leading *yeshivot* in Israel, served in the IDF as part of the “Hesder” program and has rabbinic ordination, a bachelor’s degree in Jewish education, and a master’s degree in Jewish history.

Rabbi Perez returned to Johannesburg for *shlichut* which continued for 15 years where he held various leadership positions, as community rabbi, Head of School, and CEO of Mizrahi South Africa.

In 2014, Rabbi Perez returned to Israel with his wife Shelley and their four children to serve as CEO of World Mizrahi. In this role, he has focused on the renewal and reinvigoration of the global Religious Zionist movement, with an emphasis on the centrality of the Jewish people, the Torah, and the Land and State of Israel.

Rabbi Perez has authored two books: “Leading the Way” about life and leadership, and his more recent book entitled “The Jewish State – From Opposition to Opportunity” about antisemitism and a vision for unity in Israel, which has been translated into Hebrew and Spanish.



MIZRACHI
WORLD MOVEMENT

World Mizrahi and friends of the Perez family
have launched the

Daniel Perez z”l Scholarship Fund

to support the development of young adults with
exceptional communal leadership potential.

**To contribute in memory of Daniel z”l,
please go to mizrachi.org/danielperezfund**



Tomer
Leibovitz,
hy"d

Itay
Chen,
hy"d
fallen hostage

Matan Shachar
ben Anat
may he
return soon

Daniel
Perez,
hy"d
fallen hostage

The last photo taken of Tzevet Perez



Cpt.
Amitai Granot,
hy"d

Cpt.
Eitan Fisch,
hy"d

Cpt.
Daniel Perez,
hy"d

Daniel's graduating class of Tank Officers Course