

Am Yisrael Chai
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Ohef Sholom Temple
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It is exactly 41 years ago this Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish year, that Egypt and Syria opened a coordinated surprise attack against Israel. While most Israelis were either in synagogue fasting, praying and atoning, or enjoying a day off, the unsuspecting and unprepared Israel Defense Forces were attacked on two fronts. On October 6, 1973, 1,400 Syrian tanks invaded the Golan Heights, where only 180 Israeli ones faced the onslaught. At the same time, in the south along the Suez Canal, 80,000 Egyptians attacked fewer than 500 Israeli defenders.

During the first few days of the war, amidst chaos and shock, Israel fought back, but on the defensive; fortunately and thankfully, she quickly mobilized her reserves and, within twenty days, succeeded in repulsing the invaders and in carrying the war deep into Syria and Egypt. It was only then, when Israeli forces cut off and isolated the Egyptian Third Army and were in a position to destroy it, that the United Nations Security Council called for a cease-fire and saved Egypt from a disastrous defeat.

Yet despite Israel's ultimate success and clear victory on the battlefield, the Yom Kippur War was considered by Israel a diplomatic and military failure. Why? For one, Israeli intelligence was inaccurate; wrongly, and with catastrophic results, all her experts erroneously claimed that Egypt's President Sadat would not launch a war. Also, Israel was unprepared; it had left its borders inadequately protected and let down its people. Because of these two failures, the biggest tragedy imaginable occurred -- 2,688 Israeli soldiers were killed, every one of them grieved by every Israeli as if he was their own son.

In contrast, claiming victory and proud of his country's atrocities, then Syrian Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlas told the Syrian National Assembly in December, 1973 of the "supreme valor" of the Syrian troops: "There is the outstanding case of a recruit from Aleppo who murdered 28 Jewish soldiers all by himself, slaughtering them like sheep. All of his comrades in arms witnessed this. He butchered three of them with an ax and decapitated them. . . . He struggled face to face with one of them and throwing down his ax managed to break his neck and devour his flesh in front of his comrades." The Recruit was rewarded for his carnage with Syria's Medal of the Republic.¹

I share this story, not to sicken you, but because, as we sit here nearly 41 years later, this *Rosh Hashanah* could have been the day we mourned another slaughter of our people; today could have gone down in history as the *Rosh Hashanah* Massacre of 2014 because today was the day that Hamas had determined to utilize its extensive network of tunnels to unleash terror on the people of Israel. Indeed, media reports, based on Israeli intelligence, confirmed that Hamas was planning an attack during which hundreds of terrorists would simultaneously emerge from dozens of tunnels and slaughter 10,000 Israeli civilians and soldiers. If these reports are true, as many in Israel believe they are,

the Rosh Hashanah Massacre would have been the equivalent of a hundred 9/11s in the United States. And even if the reports were exaggerated, the tunnels instilled mortal fear in the hearts of Israelis and certainly provided Hamas with the credible threat, if not the capability, of wreaking havoc on Israeli citizens and society.ⁱⁱ

After touring one of the tunnels, Professor Alan M. Dershowitz of Harvard Law School wrote in his new book, *Terror Tunnels: The Case for Israel's Just War Against Hamas*: Israel had no choice but to go into Gaza to destroy the tunnel system. Built deep beneath the ground, of reinforced steel and concrete, no technology Israel developed (and it tried) could detect them from the air. Besides that, the tunnel entrances were embedded in civilian areas, schools, mosques and hospitals, none of which could be taken out from the air without the significant loss of innocent Palestinian lives. And as we know, even when the ground incursion began, and throughout the five weeks the War in Gaza raged, the IDF did everything humanly possible to sustain life -- dropping leaflets, making phone calls, knocking on rooftops -- all of which announced imminent incursions in an effort to allow Palestinian civilians to get out of harm's way.

But in spite of its efforts, many innocents were killed. The number reported by Hamas is 2,100, many of whom, as many as 1/3 to 1/2, were Hamas fighters in street clothes.ⁱⁱⁱ But no matter, that still leaves 1000 - 1400 civilian casualties and every innocent life taken is a tragedy. And I sincerely believe that Israel hated to take every one of those lives, and to sacrifice the lives of the 66 IDF soldiers and four Israeli civilians who perished as well.

War is ugly, wretched, devastating, and heartbreaking and this one was no different. I am certain that we will all be asking for years to come, did Israel go too far or did she not do enough, to secure her people, while preserving the lives of others? But as Amos Oz, perhaps Israel's most famous author and peace activist so poignantly pleaded, when interviewed by a German newspaper this summer: "What would you do if your neighbor across the street sits down on the balcony, puts his little boy on his lap and starts shooting machine gun fire into your nursery? What would you do if your neighbor across the street digs a tunnel from his nursery to your nursery in order to blow up your home or in order to kidnap your family?"^{iv}

From Judaism's perspective, we did what we had to do. Following Maimonides' principal of the *Rodef* or the Pursuer,^v we were in the right; "if someone comes to kill you, you must forestall, by killing him," Even before we knew about the tunnels or that the three precious teenagers were kidnapped and murdered, we cautioned the enemy over and over again to stop firing rockets into Israel or face the consequences. Since Hamas did not heed our warnings, and the choice was kill or be killed, we fulfilled our obligation to defend ourselves. The principal of the *Rodef* is often used to justify defensive, commanded or obligatory wars, *milchemet mitzvah*,^{vi} as this one clearly was. In essence, human life is so precious to us that taking the life of a person who is attempting to murder is not only allowed, but it is also required. Of course, Jewish law also creates limits at every turn to prevent the sacrifice of innocent people. That is what makes all wars, and this war in particular, so painful; even though we must defend ourselves from attack, waging war against hostile enemies threatening our lives, we can never be blind to

the sacred value of every human life and the necessity to protect human life and prevent bloodshed . . . and I believe that we never are.

It is perversely ironic, then, that we agonized and continue to be torn up over lost Palestinian lives more than their own Hamas leadership did and do. Not only did Hamas provoke Israel to respond through the raining down of hundreds of missiles and the kidnap and murder of three innocent teens, but also, as one graduate student from Gaza, identified only as K. for fear of reprisal, said: "Hamas imposed a curfew; anyone walking out in the street was shot. That way people had to stay in their homes, even if they were about to get bombed. Hamas held the whole population as a human shield." And added T., a former Hamas Ministry officer, "Hamas wanted us butchered so it could win the media war against Israel showing our dead children on TV and then get money from Qatar."

Equally horrifying, the real reason Hamas initiated this war had nothing to do with the welfare of its people, and, by extension, nothing to do with Israel's so-called "occupation" of the Gaza strip; we all know that Israel withdrew unilaterally from Gaza in 2005 leaving the people of Gaza with economic opportunities to thrive; instead the Gazans destroyed the Greenhouses and beach front resorts Israel left behind and first the Palestinian Authority and, then, Hamas, re-appropriated the billions of dollars in foreign aid they received from Israel and the world to do harm rather than good for their people; we all know that all of that money and the majority of the materials meant for reconstruction from wars in Gaza in 2008 and 2012 ended up being used by Hamas for the building of the terror tunnels and the building up of its arms cache. And now another \$700 million dollars in foreign aid, designated for their relief for this war, never reached the people of Gaza either.

No, the real reason that Hamas launched this war against Israel was because of its own loss of power and standing in the region and its desire to re-position itself as the real leader of the Palestinian people. Just a few weeks ago, I attended the annual AIPAC Rabbinic Symposium in Washington DC and had the opportunity to hear some of the greatest thinkers on Israel and the Middle East speak about this most recent conflict. In spite of recent polls showing bumps in its popularity following the war, Hamas has been seriously, critically weakened in the past three years:^{vii}

The vast majority of its funding came from Syria; with nearly 200,000 dead and millions more maimed or made refugees as a result of its devastating civil war, one of the unintended consequences has been a huge loss of income for Hamas.

It's other main support came from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt who kept munitions, rocket launchers and missiles flowing to Gaza through a robust black-market-smuggling operation via 1700 underground tunnels beneath the Sinai desert. The military coup of 2013 not only ousted the Brotherhood from power, but also Egypt's new government closed down the tunnels completely.

Hamas third supplier of weapons came from Iran, Turkey and Qatar via the Mediterranean Coast, ports which have long been effectively blockaded by Israel.

Politically, Hamas has been marginalized too, sidelined completely by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Everything from Foreign Aid to peace negotiations, ineffective though they have been, has gone through President Abbas.

And even the unity agreement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, signed last spring, has proved to be meaningless. During the entire fifty-day conflict, not only did the Palestinian Authority not help Hamas in its efforts, but it aided the Israelis first in finding, and then in avenging, the Hamas operatives who kidnapped and murdered Eyal Yifrach, Naftali Frenkil and Gilad Shaar and then in partnering with Israel to keep order and peace throughout the West Bank.^{viii} In case you were unsure about Hamas' political weakening, throughout the conflict, even President Abbas, and highly-placed Egyptian and Saudi Arabian officials, blamed Hamas for the war.^{ix}

So none of Hamas' goals were met through the conflict. In addition to the innocent Palestinians killed and the massive destruction of property, they also lost 1,000 of their fighters (1/10th of their fighting force) and many of their leaders, as well as a 2/3 of their 10,000 missiles -- both devastating blows to their strength. They tipped their hand too early and, consequently, all 34 of their known terror tunnels were, thank God, destroyed. They burned through their billion-dollar budget and are not even able to pay salaries, let alone replenish their funds. Hamas is no richer for this war, no more regionally significant or influential and no more powerful within Palestinian society. They also failed to open more of their ports and borders; instead of being able to show their people what they have achieved toward bettering their lives, they will need to focus on rebuilding what they have lost amid the death and devastation they brought upon themselves.

Yet, like the Syrians in 1974, Hamas claims victory today. And there is one arena in which they could be right and that is in the world of public opinion. Not only did they control the narrative and the media bias, but also they were able to prey on the world's sympathies by highlighting over and over again the horrific images of the dead; they even succeeded in creating doubt, in those who support Israel's right to self-defense by morally equating Israel's justified aggression with Hamas' terrorism. They also succeeded in igniting a firestorm across the world.

For the very saddest lesson we learned this summer is that, just like the terror tunnels deep beneath Gaza, there is still an ignorance and hatred amongst some buried below the surface of society in Western European cities like Berlin and Paris and Brussels and London; in other westernized countries like Japan and Canada and Turkey; and even festering here in the United States in San Francisco, Seattle and Chicago. I never thought I would live to see virile and violent anti-Israel protests around the world, in which anti-Semitism would rear its ugly head just 70 years after Hitler was defeated. Once again we heard "death to the Jews" or the new slogan, "Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the Gas." Once again we witnessed nights of broken glass as Jewish-owned shops were destroyed. Once again, we saw the beaten, bloodied and dead bodies of Jews who dared to stand up for themselves.

But this time, the Jewish people and the world did not sit idly by. Thankfully, we also learned this summer that this is not 1938 and governments, including ours, as well as citizens of many of these countries have said, "enough," and made their voices heard too - that the disease of anti-Semitism, no matter how deep it is buried, no matter what guise it takes, no matter where it rears its ugly head, will not be tolerated. Just last Friday, the US House of Representatives unanimously passed a bill condemning these protests and unmasking them for

what they really are -- nothing but thinly veiled efforts to persecute the Jewish people.^x Other governments and peoples, and not only Jews, have done the same, gathering as 600 of us did in Tidewater this summer, proudly standing with Israel and affirming her right to exist and obligation to defend herself. The largest pro-Israel demonstration in the world happened not in New York or Toronto, but in a city without Jews – Calcutta – where thousands of Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs affirmed Israel's right to self-defense. In China, social media was reportedly overwhelmingly pro-Israel. And Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, expressed one of the most powerful condemnations of the link between Jew-hatred and Israel-hatred at a rally in Berlin; among the protesters were thousands of Kurds, Syrian Christians and Africans. We may have many enemies, but we also have many more active friends.

But most of all, we have Israel. Thank God there is a Jewish state that proves to the world, over and over, that we Jews are not sheep that will be led to slaughter anytime anywhere. We could not have been prouder of the way Israelis handled this horrifying summer, courageously, with fortitude and continued optimism, with the resolve of "we've been here before,"^{xi} "this too shall pass," "life will once again resume to normal," "we will not only survive, but we will thrive and prosper."^{xii} *Am Yisrael Chai*; the people of Israel lives.

If our Israeli brothers and sisters could be so courageous, what can we, sitting here in this sanctuary on the Rosh Hashanah Massacre of 2014 that wasn't do? How can we stand tall as Jews and support Israel? The best way is to go. So I am proud to announce that Ohef Sholom will be taking a trip in February 2016, from the 10th to the 21st.^{xiii} We will begin in Germany, a fairly new destination for many of us, but one that is rich in Jewish history and culture. From a visit to the Reichstag to a guided tour of the Villa in Wannsee, site of the infamous "Final Solution;" from Checkpoint Charlie to Brandenburg Gate, we will relive the history of many of Ohef Sholom's German Jewish ancestors.

After three days there, we will spend eight days in Israel, experiencing all of it from Dan in the North to Beersheva in the South, from the Mediterranean in the West to the Jordan River in the East. Whether you have been before or not, going to Israel is a transformative experience. You will see first hand why she is the homeland of the Jewish people, our homeland, and live out not only our history, but also our remarkable present and glorious future. So start saving your shekels; there is nothing like going to Israel with your Temple family. As an aside, I am so proud of our many students who defied Hamas by travelling to Israel this summer on Birthright Trips, insisting over their parents understandable concern, that Israel is exactly the place they needed to be . . . particularly at this time.

The other, more immediate, way to stand with Israel is to join me and other members of OST and the Tidewater Jewish Community this March 1-3 at the AIPAC Policy conference^{xiv} in Washington. I promise that you will learn more about Israel, the Middle East, the Jewish World and the American-Israel partnership in these three days than you possibly can any way, anywhere else; you will study with the best and brightest Jewish thinkers and be inspired by our nation, Israel and the world's top leaders. You will witness first-hand demonstrations of miraculous Israeli medical and technological advances; and hear testimonies about Israel's

amazing humanitarian work all over the world from those who Israeli aid workers have helped and saved. You will come away knowing the facts about Israel, and better able to speak out when others malign her. Finally, you will make a difference, by your very presence, by participating in the largest annual gathering of pro-Israel activists in the nation, sending a message to our leaders and the world that Israel is not alone, that we care deeply, that we will not stand idly by as Israel is terrorized or vilified. If you haven't had the opportunity to attend Policy Conference, do it now. We have a block of discounted registration slots so join me; join us. Let the office or me know that you are interested. Our presence together in Washington, D.C. will help make Israel and the Jewish people safer and stronger.

My dear friends and congregants, it is easy to despair during times like these -- to be angry that some critics have turned Israel's war of self-defense into a war crime and even seem disappointed that there weren't more dead Israelis, as if somehow that would have been more fair; it is easy to grieve not only the dead, but also having been forced to inflict devastation and suffering on others just to stay alive ourselves; it is easy to be fearful of Israel's future in a region that is turning mad^{xv} (about which we will speak on *Kol Nidrei*). These feelings are not new to our people:

A story is told of the prophet Elijah,^{xvi} the man who will one day herald the messianic age, a time of peace for all of humanity. During his lifetime, Elijah once lost faith in the Jewish people and their capacity to survive. Desperate and appealing to God for guidance, he pleaded for help. God answered: "Do not worry, Elijah. *Am Yisrael Chai*. The Jewish people lives and the Jewish people will last far longer than I will." Indeed, this is one of the reasons that, unto today, we set a chair for Elijah at a *Bris*, the entering of an eight-day-old baby into the covenant of our people. We do this so that the prophet Elijah might come and see that we are still here, that we will always be here, that God's covenant with our people is eternal. This is the meaning of *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people lives . . . today, tomorrow, forever and for always.

This past May 18th, there was a demonstration of the Iron Dome at Regent University, here in Norfolk. Many of us went and heard from Lt. Col. Gideon Weiss, one of the Vice Presidents of Rafael Advanced Defense Systems, the Israeli company who created and manufactures the Iron Dome. Not only did Col Weiss show us how the weapon worked to defend Israeli citizens, but also he illustrated, prophetically, how it would change strategically any future war against Israel.

Col. Weiss explained further that Rafael is a huge company with contracts all over the world. It recently bought a portion of Zeiss Optronik, a German company that forced Jews to work in its plant making ammunition during WWII. Col. Weiss showed us a list of the Jews who worked at Zeiss Optronik, complete with the "Identification Numbers" that the Nazi's inked on the forearms of each one of the workers. Then he held up a picture of his mother, a survivor, who now lives in Israel. Clearly visible in the photograph is the number the Nazis tattooed on her arm; Mrs. Weiss was one of those Jewish slave laborers forced to work in the Zeiss Ammunition Factory. Today, that same factory is owned by her Israeli son and is hard at work developing the technology that saved hundreds, if not thousands, of Jewish lives this past summer.

That is resiliency, -- the strength, ingenuity and will, that ensures that, no matter what, we will always be able to say with certainty, "*Am Yisrael Chai*," the Jewish people and the state of Israel lives.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ *Official Gazette of Syria*, July 11, 1974, reprinted in *JTA*, July 25, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Alan Dershowitz, *Terror Tunnels: The Case for Israel's Just War Against Hamas*, (New York: Rosetta Books), 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jodi Rudoren, "*Civilian or Not? New Fight in Tallying the Dead from the Gaza Conflict*," *New York Times*, August 5, 2014.

^{iv} Amos Oz, "Lose-lose situation for Israel," interview with Dennis Stute, *Deutsch Welle*, July 30, 2014.

^v Moses Maimonides, the Rambam, states that one who poses a threat to your life should be seen as a *rodef*, as a pursuer coming to kill. The *halakhah* encourages the killing of a *rodef* in order to prevent the *rodef* from killing. Maimonides puts it this way: "This, too, is a negative commandment: one must not take pity on the life of a *rodef* in *Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Nezikin, Hilchot Rotzeach* 1:9 and *Shulchan Aruch, Chosen Mishpat* 425-426.

^{vi} *Milchemet Mitzvah*, Commanded Wars. According to Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah Yad Melachim* 5:1, the king of Israel is permitted to fight a "commanded war" (*milchemet mitzvah*), which includes war against the seven Canaanite nations, war against Amalek, and wars fought "to assist the Jews against enemies who have attacked them."

^{vii} The information that follows is from a session by Dr. Jonathan Schanzer and Mr. Ghaith al-Omari, " Hamas, Abbas and the Future of Israeli and Palestinian Relations," at the *AIPAC National Rabbinic Symposium*, Washington D.C., September 3, 2014.

^{viii} Howard Kohr, Executive Director, AIPAC, Conference Call, July 8, 2014.

^{ix} AP and Avi Issacharoff, "Abbas blames Hamas for the prolonged battle with Israel," *The Times of Israel*, August 29, 2014.

^x Yossi Klein Halevi, "At Rosh Hashanah: Grief, fear and hope," *The Times of Israel*, September 21, 2014.

^{xi} Daniel Gordis, "We have been here before," *The Times of Israel*, July 11, 2014.

^{xiii} The resiliency of Israeli Society was one piece of good news that Ari Shavit, writer for *Ha'aretz* and author of *My Promised Land*, shared in a *Reform Movement Webinar*, July 11, 2014, in the midst of the conflict in Gaza. He said that the people of Israel were cohesive, resilient and responsible; their behavior under fire was "remarkable." The other two pieces of good news he shared were the effectiveness of Iron Dome, including the engineers of Raphael Advanced Weapons Systems, without whose technology dozens, if not hundreds, of Israelis would have been killed. The third piece of good news was the technical achievements of the IDF, who successfully eliminated Hamas' fighting force and were fairly successful in eliminating the tunnels. Israel's military had an almost one to one success rate in killing terrorists, far better than the United States in Afghanistan.

^{xiii} Information on OST's Congregational Trip to Germany and Israel, February 10-21, 2016, will be forthcoming; we will announce it in both the Bulletin and As the Temple Turns.

^{xiv} To register for AIPAC Policy Conference go to <http://www.aipac.org/act/attend-events/policy-conference>.

^{xv} Halevi, *ibid*.

^{xvi} Rabbi Sender Haber, "Iron Dome: 75 Years in the Making," *Out of the Loop, A Blog by Sender Haber*, Friday, July 18, 2014.