

Yizkor: The Fatal Hubris

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

Before the Yom Kippur war, the Israeli government was very hubristic about their abilities. What changed? And what gave them the ability to ultimately win the war?

The Sudden Siren

Today, we're marking fifty years since the Yom Kippur War in 1973. I remember that day well. When the war suddenly erupted, we were praying at the synagogue, and the entire country was enveloped in the unique Yom Kippur calm that comes over Israel each year.

Suddenly, a siren went off. Nobody knew what was going on; we all left the synagogue and rushed to find shelter on the other side of the road. On Yom Kippur in Israel, you usually don't see any cars on the road, but then military vehicles appeared out of nowhere. They had come to recruit soldiers and reservists. Men, still in their taleisim, kittels, and with machzorim in hand, climbed into army trucks.

I also remember that in the weeks that followed, there was a "general blackout." This meant that at night, no lights were allowed to be seen from the outside. Streetlights were turned off, and car headlights were painted over so they wouldn't be too bright. There was a fear that enemy planes might see that it was a populated area and target it.

Israel's Resourcefulness

This week, they interviewed a military reporter who was with the IDF forces in the Sinai during the Yom Kippur War. They asked him what he thought helped Israel win despite the disastrous start to the war, and he said it was thanks to Israel's ability to come up with new ideas and think creatively. The Israeli military knew how to think out of the box, and the soldiers handled all the unexpected situations with the creativity and resourcefulness that Israelis are famous for.

Here is a recently-publicized story that illustrates the quick thinking and resourcefulness of Israeli commanders. This story is about Lieutenant Colonel Yom Tov Tamir, who led Battalion 9 during the Yom Kippur War.

About three weeks after the war began, a ceasefire was announced. Part of this ceasefire agreement allowed Israeli military rabbis to venture into Egyptian-controlled territory to search for missing soldiers and identify casualties. Yom Tov Tamir, who had lost 67 of his soldiers during the fighting, had a strong desire to personally enter the Egyptian-held area and search for his missing men.

He approached Ariel Sharon, who was the division commander, and stated, "Who are these rabbis? How will they know where to go? I want to go there myself and identify the dead." He had a beard that had grown during the war, so Ariel Sharon looked at him and said, "I declare you an ordained rabbi." Sharon was on board. Tamir removed his officer's insignia, borrowed a kippah from one of the soldiers, and went to meet with the Chief Rabbi of the IDF, asking to participate in the mission to locate the missing soldiers.

The Chief Rabbi began asking Tamir which yeshivah he came from and where he received his rabbinic training, but one of the younger rabbis quickly understood the ruse and realized that Tamir was the ideal candidate for their mission—he was familiar with the terrain and experienced in such matters. So this younger rabbi took the Chief Rabbi aside and informed him that Tamir was a graduate of Yeshivat Mercaz Harav, and that he should be welcomed into the delegation. Consequently, Tamir was included in the mission.

The mission party also included a Dutch UN officer and an Egyptian intelligence officer. Tamir realized that the Egyptian officer was keenly attentive to what the Israelis were discussing. When the Egyptian officer realized that Tamir knew precisely where they needed to go, he addressed him in Hebrew, saying "You're not a rabbi; you're the commander of Battalion 9!" Tamir denied the assertion, but this marked the beginning of an intriguing conversation.

The Egyptian officer shared that he had studied Middle Eastern studies at the University of New Delhi in India. As they continued talking, he turned to Tamir and asked, "What I don't understand about you Jews is why do you mix the blood of children in your Passover matzah." Tamir responded, "Mohammed, you're an intelligent man. How can you believe in such nonsense?"

Suddenly, the Dutch UN officer stepped in and gave an entire lecture on kosher dietary laws, explaining the meticulous process of preparing meat, ensuring that all blood is completely removed. He told him that Jews are prohibited from consuming even a drop of blood, whether from animals, birds, or certainly not from humans.

The Israelis were impressed by the Dutch officer's familiarity with kashrut and asked how he knew so much, and he revealed that his own wife was Jewish. This entire exchange took place during their search for missing soldiers.

Their mission led them to a burnt-out tank, but they didn't find anyone inside it. While examining the area around it, Tamir noticed irregularities in the nearby ground, and utilizing a shovel from the tank's equipment, they began digging, eventually uncovering the bodies of two Israeli soldiers. Ultimately, the soldiers were brought to Jewish burial.

Resourcefulness is important, but I believe that there's more than one reason for Israel's victory in the Yom Kippur War.

High & Low

Today, during the haftarah reading, we read Isaiah chapter 57, which tells us that G-d is indeed exalted and holy, but at the same time, He dwells among those who are humble. In essence, the path to our connection to G-d is only through humility. (See Toras Menachem v. 24 p. 204). *"For so says G-d: 'I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit; in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.'"* (Isaiah, 57:15)

What happened during the Yom Kippur War? Just a few days before the war erupted, Major General Eli Zeira, the head of Military Intelligence in the IDF, confidently stated, "Israel's situation has never been better" and "the likelihood of war this year is smaller than ever." This sense of overconfidence, stemming from the swift victory in the Six-Day War, blinded Israeli leaders to potential threats (Brega Haemet pg. 138). Both political and military leaders were convinced that after their defeat in the Six-Day War, Arab nations wouldn't dare attack Israel again. Despite numerous warnings from various intelligence sources, they simply refused to acknowledge the possibility.

When the war suddenly broke out, and the Egyptian and Syrian armies launched a full-scale attack on Israel equipped with the latest Soviet weaponry, Israel found itself utterly unprepared. During the first five days of the war, known as “the terrible days,” Israel suffered heavy casualties, with hundreds dead and thousands wounded. In the political realm, there was a sense that the country teetered on the brink of collapse. There was a real worry that Israel as a country would not survive the war.

But that shattered the hubristic belief that “we cannot be defeated.” It was only then, when humility replaced arrogance, did they regain the ability to connect with He who “dwells on High, but among the contrite and lowly of spirit.” When the illusion of invincibility dissipated, we became vessels to receive the remarkable miracles of the war.

Ultimately, despite being attacked by the combined forces of Egypt and Syria, with support from Arab nations and advanced Soviet weaponry, the war concluded with a resounding victory for Israel. To a certain extent, it taught the world a more important lesson than the Six Day War; in this instance, they saw that even when Israel appears unprepared, they achieve victory. It may take a bit more time and, tragically, entail greater losses, but in the end, they regain their momentum.

The most important thing, however, is to retain our humility. The moment we lose ourselves in our own grandeur, we lose the ability to have G-d in our midst. But when we leave go of the hubris, there is nothing we cannot accomplish.