

The Prayer of the Hostage

Category: Holidays, Rosh Hashana

When Sappir Cohen was taken hostage, there was one chapter of Psalms that she knew. What was that chapter, and what is its significance?

Sappir's Story

In the summer of 2023, Sappir Cohen, 28, from Ramat Gan, had a feeling something bad was going to happen to her. She thought it was some sort of illness, maybe something medical, something really bad is coming upon her. She started going from doctor to doctor, but no one could find anything substantial. Finally one doctor told her that he found some kind of virus, but it did not warrant such fear as she was experiencing.

Sappir was not relaxed. She decided that it's time to pray to G-d - for the first time in her life. She looked online, and found a specific chapter from Psalms that was recommended to recite for 30 days and it would bring health and blessings. Every day, she recited that chapter.

As the days passed, she started paying attention to the words. The words of that chapter weren't about illness—they spoke of war, and about G-d saving her. She wondered why she was saying it—what war she was praying to be saved from?

On the morning of Friday, October 6th, Sappir was supposed to go to the Nova Festival together with her boyfriend, Sasha Troponov. Sasha really didn't want to leave home, but Sappir insisted. She convinced him to skip their quiet weekend at their apartment in Ramat Gan and head down to visit his parents at Kibbutz Nir Oz near the festival. "It was just a regular weekend," she says, looking back.

Then came that fateful Shabbat. The alarms went off. She heard 'Red Alert, Red Alert,' and rockets raining down. Then they heard terrorists breaking in. Ten of them just walked right in and pulled her out. She was overcome with hysterical fear—shaking, sweating in terror, as she heard "Allah Akbar" and the huge commotion. At that moment, she understood the meaning of her prayer.

When the terrorists put her on a motorcycle and everyone was filming her, she

lifted her head so her parents would recognize her in the footage. Thanks to that prayer she said every day, she remained optimistic.

Sappir was abducted by the armed terrorists, with nothing but her nightgown on her back. They took her on a motorcycle to Gaza, and when they arrived, an angry mob greeted her. They attacked her, and she had to defend herself with her bare hands, as she prayed to G-d to protect her. At the end of it, her entire body was covered in bruises.

During the first week of her captivity, Sappir was placed with another hostage, Sahar Calderon. Together, they were held in an apartment under tight security, with two guards who mocked and cursed them.

Loud explosions echoed constantly, with no way of knowing when they would be struck or if the terrorists would shoot or do something worse. In those terrifying moments, she realized she didn't want to spend what could be the final chapter of her life in fear—she wanted to make a difference, to give hope.

One time, she and Sahar Calderon were starving: “I told Sahar, ‘Don't worry, we're on a mission now!’ We knew there was a room where they kept all the pita bread. We grabbed some and stuffed them under our shirts. We ran and ate them—just before the terrorists came back.”

Since they were staying in a fragile building while the IDF bombed nearby, the terrorists moved them into the tunnels. Everything was damp and smelled terrible. The terrorists sang songs about conquering Israel and hurled curses as they walked through the tunnels. At one point, they passed by 20 people packed tightly together, lying like sardines—this was the tunnel for the older hostages. She said they were all lying there, pale—it looked as if they were dead.

She encountered more hostages there, and together they formed a group. The group became a source of strength—on days when someone broke down, the others would lift them up. They took care of one another, clinging to hope and doing their best to stay safe. At one point, one of the hostages was paralyzed with fear, thinking the terrorists could kill him at any moment, and Sappir managed to calm him down and bring some optimism—even in the impossible circumstances.

One day, the terrorists called her to watch TV—it was the rally in Tel Aviv, with thousands of people. She felt a moment of happiness seeing it. But what shocked

her even more was when one of the terrorists remarked, "When the Jews are united, they're strong, but we'll wait patiently, and soon there will be chaos among them." They knew that the Jews' greatest weakness was division among themselves.

One day, the terrorist guarding her drew a candle and wrote her name, Sappir, on it. She asked him why he did that. He replied, "I don't like you; you're my enemy. But when you're here, there is light." She couldn't believe the terrorist had said those words to her.

Sappir was held captive for 55 days. During all those long days, that chapter gave her the strength and hope not to despair.

The L-rd is My Light

Once, one of the guards asked her, "Do you pray?" She said, "yes, I do and I know the prayer by heart." He told her to recite it, and she did so.

What was the chapter that gave Sappir so much strength?

From the beginning of Elul until Shemini Atzeret, there is a custom to recite Psalm 27 twice a day in prayer.

This psalm expresses a strong belief in G-d. It begins with the words: "The L-rd is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The L-rd is the strength of my life, whom shall I dread?" King David continues: "When evildoers approached me to devour my flesh, my oppressors and my foes, they stumbled and fell... if an army were to beleaguer me, my heart would not fear; if war were to rise against me, in this I trust."

King David declares his unwavering trust in G-d, even in the face of immediate, tangible danger, even when surrounded by enemies waging war against him. Later in the psalm, he pleads: "Do not conceal your countenance from me... do not abandon me or forsake me, G-d of my deliverance... Do not give me over to the will of my oppressors."

The psalm ends with these beautiful words: "Hope in the L-rd, be strong, and let your heart be valiant, and hope in the L-rd." Trust in G-d, and He will give you strength.

The man who gave her the advice to recite that specific chapter didn't just choose any random chapter. Their encounter happened during the month of Elul, a time when everyone adds this chapter, "L'David Hashem" (Psalm 27) to the daily prayers, and that's why he recommended it to her. She recited it until Hoshana Rabba, which is the last day it's said, and the next day she was kidnapped.

It's a very moving story, but you might ask yourself, "That's all well and good, that chapter worked for Sappir Cohen, but why should I say that chapter?"

First of all, there are still so many hostages still in captivity. Why shouldn't we say this chapter for them, on their behalf? It's the least we can do. But truly, this chapter applies to all of us. Because, in a sense, we are all hostages. Before descending into this world, our souls dwelled in the shadow of the Divine Presence, close to G-d, where it was warm and comfortable. Then, suddenly, the soul was taken and sent down into this physical and material world.

Our soul was 'taken hostage' but it longs for those better days when it was with G-d. And to stay connected to G-d in this material world—it's only through mitzvot. The problem is, life consumes us. Sometimes it feels like we're drowning in a sea of insignificant tasks and pursuits, running from one to the next.

And somehow, every time we want to do a mitzvah, someone calls and needs us at that very moment, or something urgent comes up that can't wait. And so, an entire year passes, and the holidays come again. That's why we say this prayer.

We, the "hostages," ask G-d to give us the strength to deal with our enemies. Who is the enemy? It's the evil inclination, which tempts a person and lays siege to them, confusing them with all kinds of "important things" that aren't truly important, and in most cases, are entirely unnecessary.

And so, during the High Holiday season, G-d reaches out to the Jews and calls them to come back. The Rebbe says this is the time to break free from the captivity of the material world and draw closer to G-d. "Hope in the L-rd, be strong, and let your heart be valiant, and hope in the L-rd."