**Adjusting Sights**

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It is so good to see you here for our regular Sunday night minyan.

**As the calendar turns to Tishrei, as the leaves begin to turn, we turn to memory.**

Do you remember where you were when your personal life intersected with important events on national and international stage?

Growing up in the late 1960s, I listened on a transistor radio to news about the Six Day War. I sang “Hey Jude” not knowing that it signalled the breakup of the Beatles. There were civil rights marches, assassinations, urban riots and anti-War protests. The Soviet Jewry movement began.

Some here can recall Expo 67, the Montreal Olympics and the FLQ crisis.  Others may remember demonstrations in Ottawa during the 1971 visit of Soviet Premier Kosygin or the dramatic goal and Canadian victory in the 1972 hockey series in Moscow. I was at the game when Joe hit the home for the Blue Jays run to win the 1993 World Series. I cheered the Raptors in 2019 when Larry Tanenbaum lifted the NBA championship trophy and said, “Hagbah.”

I moved to Canada after the first Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many thought that these signalled a new time in history, with an historic decline in anti-semitism. Thirty years ago, just before my first Rosh Hashanah at Beth Tzedec, the Oslo Accords were signed on the lawn of the White House. I remember saying that I feared that there would be much more blood before there would be a real peace.

Fifty years ago, I was in Canada as a rabbinical student to lead Yom Kippur services. Kol Nidre ushered in a day of fasting and prayer. The next afternoon, in Israel, the sacred tranquility was shattered by a surprise invasion of Egyptian and Syrian forces. Some of you may have seen the new film, “Golda,” which depicts the dark day and the difficult war that ensued. Many of you were not yet born.

Yossi Klein Halevi writes:

*Sirens sounded like a premature blast of the shofar …. Israelis assumed it would end quickly.... Surely Israeli intelligence had detected the Egyptian and Syrian troop buildup and allowed them to enter a trap. But there was no trap. ….*

Israel was unprepared. The head of Military Intelligence had just stated, “There will not be another war for 10 years.” He brushed away advance reports of Egyptian and Syrian plans.

Avraham Rabinowitz described the scene in the Cabinet.

*At 12:30 p.m., [Golda] Meir … was pale. … She spoke in a monotone …. reached the bottom line. … word had been received …that war would break out at 6 p.m. this day on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts.*

*The ministers were stunned. … two-thirds of the army [was] … unmobilized.. … An aide entered and handed [Dayan] a note. The defense minister announced that Egyptian planes were [already] attacking in Sinai. … sirens began to wail in the streets outside….*

[*In] the … command post beneath the Defense Ministry compound i…. no one seemed to know what to do …..The chaos … reflected the desperation at the front.… along the Suez Canal, there were rows of Israeli POWs, stunned and disheveled, with hands padlocked over their heads. [From] the Golan Heights, Syrian tanks were approaching the Galilee. (Halevi)*

Uncertainty and confusion. It appeared as if Israel would be overrun. Moshe Dayan contemplated use of an atomic weapon. Eventually, with determination and daring, the tide began to turn. But the costs were very high.

As individuals, Yom Kippur is a day when Jews contemplate mortality and morality. In Israel, the day is magnified by the enormity of the deaths of almost 3,000 soldiers, intensified by the injuries that affected so many more, and deepened by the psychological trauma that permeated family after family.

Trauma makes us forever different. Today’s Israel was shaped in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. The euphoria that followed the Six Day War evaporated. The vulnerability of Israel was felt once again.

The most powerful war novels explore the souls of soldiers and civilians. The Israeli novel, *Tiyyum Kavvanot*, tells of a young observant soldier in the Yom Kippur War. The title, *Adjusting Sights*, refers to calibrations of the soul and of the tank turret.

Hayyim Sabato’s novel is about more than the spiritual crisis of a young yeshiva student. It is about adjusting sights in many areas of life. And it is about each of us who has faced fear and fatigue, confusion and uncertainty, loss of faith and the need to believe.

*..the end of Yom Kippur…. Dov and I…had studied together and trained in the same tank. I was the gunner. Dov was the loader. Together we … boarded the [soldiers’] bus. We thought we’d be back soon. … [After] three terrible days that followed… I heard of Dov’s death.*

*…In late spring we… handed in our gear … and returned to the Talmud… I wanted to tell [my] Rabbi what had happened … How our tanks were knocked out on the second day of the war, and how they burst into flames … and how the blackened loader hit the ground with his leg on fire and … how our tank commander, Gidi, shouted, “Gunner, fire!” and I shouted back, “I don’t know what to aim at.” “Gunner, don’t lose the horizon. This is a war, not a maneuver. Do you hear me, gunner?”*

*“Yes, sir, I hear you. What should I aim at? Where?”*

In the intensity of the Golan battle and with a damaged tank, Hayyim must figure out how to adjust his gun sight. The loss of his buddy and the chaos of war force Hayyim to also adjust his spiritual direction.

…*We prayed when we could. You never knew when you would have another chance. … the war had taught me what concentration in prayer was — in the ambush, with no radio and unadjusted gun sights and the missiles coming closer and the tanks around us bursting into flames. Gidi had shouted, “Gunner, pray! We’re taking fire!” I prayed. There wasn’t a hair’s breadth then between my heart and my lips.*

The following year, at the conclusion of the fast, Hayyim is again in Jerusalem.

*… I looked at the moon…. Sometimes God had mercy on the undeserving and shone His light on them. That mercy and that light stayed with you forever. … [But] sometimes God descends to His garden to the bed of spices to gather lilies – my friends, Sariel and Shmuel and Shaya and Avihu. And Dov. ….*

*[Selihot] prayers echoed in my ears: Asher be’yado nefesh kol hai, veru’ah kol besar ish…. [You hold in Your] hands the souls of all that live/ And the spirit of each mortal/…/Master of all worlds, spare the work of your hands! … A small cloud drifted across [the moon]. … I stood there in silence…. I aimed my thoughts at Dov and I said, Shalom aleichem. Peace onto you. Shalom aleichem.*

Dr Yitzhak Brook of Georgetown University was a physician during the Yom Kippur War. He wrote:

*Coping with fear and anxiety under fire was one of the most acute problems I faced. …Soldiers… came for counselling. ……I told them to be tough … to go back to their duties. … It eventually dawned on me that … “yes, I am afraid as well.” …. I observed a relief in their faces when I admitted my own fear. … I told them that courage should be defined as the ability to perform one’s duty despite fear and anxiety*.

Dr Brook had to readjust his sights to acknowledge his distress, and still carry out his responsibilities. Despite the losses of our loved ones, despite our fear and hesitation, we too are called upon to perform our duties in life. The courage to go forward may require us to adjust our sights, to change the way we view life.

I work with the program Peace of Mind which hosts former Israeli soldiers whose units have faced terribly difficult combat encounters. Four units will be welcomed to Toronto this year for therapy and healing. I would love to see Ottawa congregations combine efforts to help these warriors.

My son was a tank gunner. Usually, the readjustment of the gunner’s sights is a simple act of calibration. However, at times the mechanism to make the alignment is lost or broken. The classical Jewish instrument for the recalibration of our souls, the *mitsvah* tradition, is unknown to so many. Yet it still preserves power to help.

I have seen this as people say *kaddish* for their loved ones. Yom Kippur also helps to adjust our *kavvanot,* to get our lives into better focus.

But arrogance and complacency often block us from what we need to do to adjust our spiritual sights and realign our moral lives.

Arrogance and complacency affected Israel. Religious Zionists began settlement in Judea and Samaria in earnest. The Zionism is Racism resolution passed in the United Nations. “For right-wing Israelis, … the sin of Yom Kippur was **complacency**, allowing ourselves to believe that [we] no longer faced existential threat. The conclusion was: We must … never lower our guard”, and should recognize “the futility of concessions and weakness.” **Arrogance** came later, with the belief that power and control would be more important than negotiations and compromise.

Sadat eventually came to Jerusalem. Peace activists felt the Yom Kippur War could have been prevented. They blamed leaders who were unresponsive to Arab overtures and the popular post-1967 T-shirts that mocked the defeated Arab armies. Left-wing Israelis saw Israel sharing responsibility for the absence of peace. For them, “the sin of Yom Kippur 1973 was **arrogance**, an excessive reliance on power. The conclusion was: We must be open to peace and not only rely on power.” Complacency came later, with the belief that Olso and Camp David would usher in peace.

In our own lives, arrogance is the need to “big ourself up”—whether publicly or just inside our own minds. Arrogance often reflects inner anxiety. Repeatedly during the *al het* confessional, we will speak of the sin of arrogance, excessive pride נטיית גרון, hard-heartedness אמוץ הלב, and conceit עינים רמות.

*In the moment of transgression, behaviour that should embarrass seems proper, masked, as it were, by the powerful emotions that prompt it: anger, fear, greed, resentment, confusion, and self-righteousness. Only later, … does our action come once again into our mind, so that we may face it, acknowledge it for the mistake that it is, and make amends.*  (Jonathan Slater)

Complacency stems from self-satisfaction. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditschev claims, *“If a person performs a mitzvah and thinks it has been done perfectly, God disregards the mitzvah… because of the person’s attitude”* (Lev 4.27, *Kedushat Levi*). Complacency is dangerous in our daily lives and our spiritual practice. We feel that we know best, that our relationships are OK, that we don’t need to ask for help. But what is familiar can become perilous.

How perilous? Some of you will recall how easy air travel was before 9.11. Others will remember what some called the “Arab spring” of 2011. It led from a sense of relative stability to the killing of thousands of Syrians and a refugee crisis which transformed European politics.

Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo writes: *Our [ancestors] understood these hours [of Yom Kippur] to be … a time of great spiritual embarrassment…..… but we have lost the sense of trembling before God. We are complacent.*

Judging from what some political leaders tweet and cyber-bullies post, there is no longer a feeling of shame regarding what we do. We have been numbed by our needs and pleasures. We are neither contrite nor embarrassed.

In Canada post- 911 and in Israel following the Yom Kippur War, events compelled leaders and people to face new realities. To adjust sights, one rotates the lenses until double images align.

Facing the war in Ukraine, the possibility of a nuclear Iran and competition with China, and a divided Congress, we are watching the United States struggle. Canada is trying to reduce regional conflict while fostering global trade and investment. While promoting environmental, human rights and social justice in the world, we must manage relations with the United States and Europe, China and India.

Israel is trying to align the need for diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia with tangible progress toward a Palestinian state. Meanwhile the Palestinian leadership continues to reject the legitimacy of Israel and Israeli political leaders seek to annex more and more territory.

Competing visions and voices call for an adjustment of sights to gain some clarity. But it is not so clear who or what is out there.

In *Adjusting Sights,* Hayyim eventually comes to a different and deeper understanding of God and life. There is appreciation and gratitude. Yet his experiences have taught him that life is not so easy and faith not so glib. One does not always return home in a few days. Some never return. Faith is clouded, like the moon. Hayyim does not discard his faith. He struggles with it. Just as we do.

Tomorrow, at *yizkor*, we will be called to struggle with our clouded-over faith. As we evoke those we have loved, we will be called to adjust the way we recall their lives, to align all the elements of their personalities, to a re-balance our picture of the people we remember.

Yom Kippur also is a day when we place ourselves in the coordinates. We aim, as it were, at ourselves. Without arrogance or complacency, hopefully with humility, we must adjust our sights, our focus on the world, on our families, on ourselves.

***“Gunner, fire!”***

***I shouted back, “I don’t know what to aim at.”***

***“Gunner, don’t lose the horizon. This is a war, not a maneuver. Do you hear me, gunner?”***

***“Yes, sir, I hear you. What should I aim at? Where?”***

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