

Sacrifice and Its Rewards

Shabbat Lech L'cha 5784

October 27, 2023

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When I take a group to Israel, I let the guide lead the tours. With one exception. At Mount Herzl, Israel's National Cemetery, I take over. Tonight, I would like to take you on that tour.

The layout of the cemetery brings us first to the grave of Theodor Herzl, described in Israel's Declaration of Independence as "the spiritual father of the Jewish State." Herzl was not first to expound the modern Zionist idea, but he organized the movement. He died in 1904 at age forty-four and was buried in Vienna. His remains were brought to its final resting place atop the mountain that bears his name in 1949.

Unlike Abraham and Sarah, Herzl was not religious. He received no divine call to leave Europe to settle in the Middle East. He visited Palestine, as the land was known then; but in the aftermath of the Kishinev Pogrom, Herzl was prepared to accept a Jewish State in Uganda, offered by the British.

In our Torah portion, God says to Abraham—and functionally, also to Sarah—*Lech l'cha me'artz'cha umimolad't'cha umibeit avicha*, "Go forth from your land, your native land, and from your ancestral home to the land that I will show you."ⁱ Our sages note the apparent redundancy—Abraham's and Sarah's "land," their "native land" and their "ancestral home" are all the same. Ramban explains: "The reason for [the repetition] is that it is difficult for people to leave the country where they dwell, where they have friends and companions. That is more true if this be their native land, and still more if their whole family is there."ⁱⁱ In calling Abraham and Sarah to their new land, God acknowledges the sacrifice.

Herzl, by contrast, didn't live long enough to settle in the Land of Israel. Still, Herzl made profound sacrifices. Above all, as an enlightened, modern European Jew, Herzl gave up his comfort. He sacrificed his cherished belief that life could continue to improve for European Jews. He gave up a successful journalistic career to pursue a dream. And perhaps the strain of his efforts led to his untimely death.

Our tour moves now to graves of the deceased presidents and prime ministers of the State of Israel. We pause at the burial place of Yitzchak Rabin—martyred in the pursuit of peace.

Rabin was born in Jerusalem, so he did not give up one ancestral home for another. He devoted his entire life to serving the Jewish State, beginning in its *Haganah*, literally, “defense,” force before the establishment of the State. Then, Dexter Filkins writes, “After independence, Rabin focused on building the [Israel Defense Force]; his animating vision...was that peace would only be possible only when Israel achieved military superiority over any combination of Arab foes.”ⁱⁱⁱ

From before the State was established through the 1967 Six-Day War, Rabin’s “home” was the pursuit of Israel’s military might. During his second term as Prime Minister, though, Rabin seized an opportunity to defend Israel by making peace rather than war. Many of us marveled, imagining that we were witnessing the beginning of the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, when President Clinton guided Rabin and Yasser Arafat, combatants for decades, to shake hands as they signed the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn.

On November 4, 1995, more than 100,000 came into Kings of Israel Square, now known as Rabin Square, to rally for peace.^{iv} Among them was an extremist whose rabbis had taught that Rabin was threatening the lives of Israelis by pursuing two states for two peoples. Rabin sacrificed his life in the pursuit of peace. His name is remembered for blessing.

A few steps away, we reassemble around seven memorials arranged in the shape of a parachute. Three are graves. Four are monuments to martyrs whose remains were never recovered. Between 1943 and 1945, a group of young Zionists trained with the British military to parachute behind enemy lines. They were sent to places familiar to them, having recently immigrated from Europe. “Their mission,” according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “was to organize resistance to the Germans and aid in the rescue of Allied personnel.”^v

These brave young adults also hoped to warn Hungarian Jews of the fate that awaited them. You see, the Holocaust came late to Hungary, and was somewhat frenzied. Perhaps some could escape. Among those who parachuted into Hungary was Hannah Szenes, the poet whose words we shall hear later in our service as we remember our beloved dead. We sing another of her poems at her graveside, *Eli, Eli*, “O God, I pray that these never end: The sand and the sea, the rush of the water, the prayer of the heart.” Hannah Szenes and her comrades remembered here sacrificed their youth, giving their lives in the hope of saving others of their people.

Our tour culminates as we come to the section for soldiers killed in the War of Independence. I tell a story, not from 1948, but from 1988. That summer, I led a group of forty-three sixteen-year-olds from Texas and Oklahoma, spending six

weeks in Israel on a program organized by NFTY, our Reform Jewish youth movement. As we stopped at these graves, I translated: “Born in Poland. Died in the War of Independence. Age 19. Born in Hungary. Died in the War of Independence. Age 17. Born in Lodz. Died in the War of Independence. Age 21.” Some of these young people had escaped Europe before the Holocaust, were trained in the *Haganah*, and had participated in building the Zionist dream. Others, though, were survivors of concentration camps, able to enter Palestine only as the British Mandate was ending, as the Jewish State of Israel was declared. With little time for training, armaments were thrust into their hands, as they went willingly to the front to defend their new land—their people, suddenly no longer defenseless.

But I promised you a story from 1988. As I told these young soldiers’ stories, one of my teenaged charges, a boy named Sasha, began sobbing. I felt badly for him; but as I talked to him—after he calmed, which took quite a while—I realized that he “got” it. He said something like, “These people sacrificed their lives so that I can live freely in Tulsa, proudly as a Jew in this world.”

This morning, I sent WhatsApp messages to my sister-in-law Karen and niece Hannah, wishing them a Shabbat Shalom, praying for peace and security—above all, for Hannah’s husband Dvir, serving in the reserves. Hannah’s sacrifices since October 7 are beyond what most of us can comprehend. She must worry about whether her husband will return safely or at all. She must tend to her three young children without him. Still, her focus is not on her own challenges. You see, Hannah and Dvir are members of Kibbutz Glil Yam, which has taken in scores of evacuees from the evacuated area around the Gaza Strip. Hannah and her friends and neighbors are busy feeding and housing and provisioning these traumatized men, women, and children.

Today, though, Hannah and her children went north, meeting her sister Ruth and Ruth’s husband and three kids at their parents’ home for Shabbat. Karen sent me a photo of Hannah and Ruth, both looking well. Hannah’s smile may be forced, but she has earned the familial TLC. Everybody needs a respite, particularly from life-giving sacrifice.

Our people in Israel have all gone forth, not by a divine call, but in response to terror. They have left comfort behind, even if they are still living under the same roofs that sheltered them on the morning of October 7. They have entered a season of profound sacrifice—for the nation and for each person, individually. Let us pray that they find some moments of peace this Shabbat. We know their prayer: Like the people whose graves we “visited” on this evening’s tour, like Abraham and Sarah: Let their sacrifices bring blessing.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 12:1.

ⁱⁱ Ramban on Genesis 12:1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dexter Filkins, "Shot in the Heart," *The New Yorker*, October 19, 2015,
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/26/yitzhak-rabin-assassination-israel-oslo-peace-accords>.

^{iv} Filkins.

^v <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-parachutists-from-palestine>.