

Grateful for the Israeli Spirit

Shabbat Vayeitzei 5784

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Last Shabbat, Rabbi Hara Person, Rabbi Judy Schindler, and I visited Elana and Eyal Kaminka at their home in Tzur Hadassah, a town not far from Jerusalem. Their son, Yannai, of blessed memory, was killed by Hamas terrorist on October 7, and we were paying a condolence call. The Kaminkas are members of K'hilat Shir Chadash, a Reform congregation where Yannai celebrated his Bar Mitzvah seven years ago. On our visit, which followed Shabbat morning services at Shir Chadash, we were accompanied by Yael Schweid and Naomi Ben Ari, two Israeli Reform rabbinic students who are also members of that congregation and friends of the Kaminka family.

Yannai was a lieutenant in the Israel Defense Force. He would have turned twenty-one during *shloshim*, the thirty-day period of mourning after his death.

On October 7, Yannai was serving at the Army's Zikim training base, adjacent to a kibbutz by the same name. Guard posts on the base that morning were staffed by basic trainees under Yannai's command. Yannai quickly perceived the

danger, and he ordered all the trainees to shelter. Officers and sergeants would take their places. One of the sergeants was hit, and Yannai rushed to her aid and to provide backup. Yannai was killed, alongside six others, only one a trainee. Ninety trainees and thirty civilians on the base were saved by their heroism, as was the entire population of Kibbutz Zikim.ⁱ

My teacher, Micah Goodman, says that, on October 7, the State of Israel did not exist. Israelis were there, but the state was not. Soldiers were there, but the Israel Defense Force was not. The state broke its contract with its citizens—above all, those who have bravely made their homes and built their lives within and near Israel’s internationally recognized borders, including communities adjacent to the Gaza Strip.ⁱⁱ Civilians waited in their safe rooms for hours—in some cases, more than a day—for the Army to arrive. Too many were killed or kidnapped as they waited. Where was the IDF? In the Occupied West Bank, protecting Israeli settlers, including extremists who established their settlements illegally. Where was the government? Consumed with a tactic previously well-known only in Latin America, intent on an auto-coup, transforming their democratic election into an autocracy, free from judicial review. Where was Prime Minister Netanyahu, whose

longstanding promise to Israelis has been that he and only he could keep them safe? He was and remains consumed with keeping himself out of jail, despite several indictments on corruption charges, and now he's also busy deflecting responsibility for the October 7 catastrophe from himself to his subordinates.

But soldiers like Yannai were there on October 7, and they saved lives. Imagine how many more lives could have been saved if brigades had not been moved from the Gaza border to the West Bank in the days, weeks, and months leading up to what Israelis are calling “that black Shabbat.”

I had been in Israel twice in 2023 before my visit in the last week. After I returned, both in February and in July, I told you about the extraordinary Israeli protest movement. From January through September, hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the street every Saturday night to protest the Netanyahu government's antidemocratic judicial coup—or, put another way, to stand up for the democracy of the Jewish State. Throughout those nine months, Israelis demonstrated that, if the government would not protect the State of Israel, the people would. It was the most powerful demonstration of Zionism I had ever seen.

Old as I am, I was not yet born in the State's early days, and I was a small child at the time of the Six-Day War. Now, though, Israelis would dedicate themselves to preserving the founders' dreams.

Our Torah portion this week begins as Jacob leaves the Promised Land, seeking refuge from his brother Esau, who has flown into a murderous rage upon after Jacob tricked their father into giving him a blessing intended for Esau. Isaac has dispatched Jacob to find refuge with his uncle, Laban. In time of trouble, one appeals first to family. In so many ways, throughout the last seven weeks, Israelis in need have been able to turn to their "family," to the extraordinary Israeli people if not to their government, and to our Jewish people around the world.

On October 7, before the Army even reached some of the communities that had been attacked, and with Hamas terrorists still in the country, the protest movement mobilized to meet the needs of survivors. It has never stopped. Onetime protestors now provide the infrastructure, the organizing capacity, and much of the human capital behind the extraordinary effort to keep the hostages at the top of the nation's agenda, apparent government indifference notwithstanding.

Throughout our visit, my colleagues and I repeatedly heard about how the State had not come through—for survivors, for evacuees, for hostage families. Israelis are stepping in to fill the gaps.

Our little group was privileged to join our Israeli Reform rabbinic colleagues at Moshav Beit Ezra, not much more than fifteen miles from the northern border of the Gaza Strip. There, we spent a few hours pruning and weeding in a hothouse filled with tomato plants. We had responded to an “agricultural emergency callup,” an effort styled after military mobilizations, this one intended to save Israel’s farms from the disaster of losing their workforce after October 7. That work will need to be sustained for many months to come. In 2023, first with democracy demonstrations and now with volunteerism, Israelis have demonstrated that they can do it.

Eyal Kaminka, the father of Yannai, of blessed memory, is a management consultant who formerly served as Director of the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem. He is also a poet. Yannai had turned the last line of one of his father’s poems into his personal motto: *Rak balaila ro'im kochavim,*

“Only at night can one see stars.” An ironic smile creeps across Elana Kaminka’s face as she describes that she has always urged her four children never to get a tattoo. Now, though, she receives constant WhatsApp messages from Yannai’s friends and supporters, sending photos of his motto now tattooed on their arms.

We are living at what has become a dark time for the Jewish people in Israel and around the world. Thankfully, we can see the stars. They are the people of Israel. *Am Yisrael chai*. The people of Israel live. Let the people of Israel continue to shine through this darkest of nights.

Amen.

ⁱ My recollection of conversation with Elana and Eyal Kaminka is supplemented here by Nikolas Lanum, “Mother of fallen Israeli soldier recounts how her son died protecting others: ‘We still love him so deeply,” *Fox News*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/mother-fallen-israeli-soldier-son-died-protecting-others>.

ⁱⁱ Paraphrase of Micah Goodman’s comments to the Union for Reform Judaism North American Board, October 29, 2023.