

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

Yom HaZikaron/Yom Ha'atzmaut

From Rav Binny Freedman

Dedicated to the memory of David Golavensas, an Officer in the elite Golani infantry Brigade, killed last summer while fulfilling his duties in Hebron.

It is hard to describe what it takes to be a combat infantry soldier in the Israeli army, but those who succeed in the elite Golani brigade are few and far between. To be chosen from amongst them to be an Officer means you have something special, and David Golavensas was one of those rare few made of that 'special stuff' it takes to be a combat officer.

You don't get drafted to such a role, you have to earn it and you have to be invited to it, and ultimately you have to choose it. First you have to choose to undergo Officer's course, and then, every day, for seven long months, as an Officer Cadet, you have to choose to find the maximum you have to give to get through Officer's training.

Even more challenging, if you make it through the grueling course and earn your bars, you have to choose every day to be the role model you need to be, to earn your men's respect every day.

This week in Israel we remember, on Memorial Day (Yom Hazikaron), those who gave everything so that we might have a State, after which we will celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the state of Israel.

And on Shabbat here in Israel, we will, appropriately, read the portions of Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, which when read together translate literally as 'After the deaths of the Holy ones'.

And so it is, every year that we are tasked with celebrating the blessing of living in our homeland, in a modern Jewish State, immediately after remembering and experiencing the pain of all those we lost in the process. It is one of the most difficult transitions there is, and this year seventy two families will struggle with this fresh, personal pain for the first time.

Shimon and Esther Golavensas and their children will experience the sharp agenzizing pain of Yom HaZikaron as a bereaved family, for the first time; having entered the family of those who have lost their beloved soldier-sons this year. It is a club to which we accord the highest honors, but it is a club no-one really wants to join...

David Golavensas, a Golani combat Officer, was killed defending against terrorists in Hebron last summer, and his father Shimon will tell you, the pain is as fresh today, and in some ways more so, then the day they received the terrible news...

What does it mean to be a 'Kadosh' a holy one? Growing up, I remember studying about the idea that a person could die 'Al Kiddush Hashem': in sanctification of G-d's name. And traditionally this meant a Jew was faced with a horrible choice: faced with the choice of being killed unless he murdered,

adulterated, or worshipped idols, his willingness to choose death rather than violate one of these three great commandments was a sanctification of G-d's name.

Indeed, Rav Unterman (one of the early Chief Rabbis of the State of Israel, in his *Shevet Mi'yehudah*) suggests that it was precisely this choice that created the sanctification of G-d's name. This of course implied that if a person had no choice, he was not actually sanctifying Hashem's name, leading some to suggest that all of the millions of Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, were not considered to have died *Al Kiddush Hashem*, in sanctification of Hashem's name, because they had no choice; the Nazis simply murdered them all. Indeed, there are those that have suggested that the Holocaust was and remains inherently the greatest Chilul Hashem or desecration of Hashem's name in Jewish History.

But many years ago, I recall Rav Shlomo Riskin quoting Rava who says (tractate *Sanhedrin* 47a) that even a wicked person who is cruelly murdered by non-Jews simply because he is a Jew, receives atonement for his transgressions . And Rav Soleveitchik suggests that such a person can indeed be considered to have sanctified Hashem's name and is a *Kadosh*.

Perhaps these two opinions are not so far apart; even if a person has no choice as to whether he will die, he still has a choice as to *how* he will die. And when Jewish men and women risked everything in the camps to wear a pair of tefillin or light Shabbat candles in the camps, they sanctified Hashem's name in every moment...

We are blessed to be living in a time where Jewish blood no longer comes cheap. And unlike seventy years ago when so many Jews could only choose how to die, today we are blessed to choose how we live. But we owe this privilege in no small part, to the young men and women who choose every day, to put themselves in harm's way, that we might freely walk and hold our heads up high, in a Jewish state.

At the shiva, a soldier showed up to the Golavensas home and seemed to be broken, in an extreme state of pain and mourning; he even asked if he could say Kaddish for his beloved commander, David. Hugging his father Shimon, he told him that his son David was the first person who had ever believed in him, and refused to allow him to fail. 'He was the first person' said this broken soldier from a broken home, 'who ever really believed in me; he was the first person who really saw me; how do I continue? What can I do now?' he asked Shimon's father.

The response he received speaks volumes about who David was, as well as the wellspring from which he was born: 'Just think of David; ask yourself what he would tell you to do, and then trust enough in him and in yourself, to do it, and he will live on in you... '.

David chose not only what to do for those around him, but as well, how to see those around him; to see the best in them, the potential in them. His parents described all the hundreds of hugs, and letters they received sharing with them what a difference their son had made; how he would visit them in their homes; deliver food to underprivileged families, and always see the best in them...

It is not accidental that 51 mitzvot are to be found in the portion of *Kedoshim*; including almost all of Maimonides' essential Mitzvot for becoming an ethical human being...

This year, yet again, at 11am on Memorial Day, at Har Herzl, Israel's National Military Cemetery, I will be'ezrat Hashem stand at the grave of Dani Moshitz of blessed memory, who is still, and will always be to me, 20 years old, which is how old he was when he was killed in an ambush at the Kasmiyeh Bridge in Lebanon, in 1985. I will see his youthful face, and his amazing smile and the tears will well up again, threatening to overcome me, fresh as that awful day back in 1985. And then, instead of leaving, I will walk over to David Golavensas' grave and perhaps catch Shimon his dad for a hug and a moment which has no words...

And I will dream of the day when finally, there are no fresh graves...

I have a stone this year that I brought back from Auschwitz which I hope to place on David's grave. Because seventy years after Auschwitz, we can choose to be better, and to see a better world, just like David did...

Shabbat Shalom, and Chag Ha'Atzmaut Sameach, (Happy Israel Independence day!)

From Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman