

Yom Kippur 5734 - Yom Kippur 5784

A few weeks ago, Alice and I went to see "Golda." The movie stars Oscar winner Helen Mirren portraying Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel during the Yom Kippur War. Fifty years ago on Yom Kippur afternoon, the armies of Egypt and Syria, along with Expeditionary Forces of nine Arab nations plus Cuba launched the greatest threat to Israel's existence since its War of Independence.

Another Oscar winner, Israeli film maker Guy Nattiv, directed the movie. Nattiv recounts several reasons why he made the movie, three most important.

First, to set the record straight about Golda's role in the events leading up to the war and then the conduct of the war.

Second, to document the war's dramatic, even traumatic, impact on Israel. Israel's stunning victory in the 1967 Six Day War created national euphoria. The movie's prophetic prologue notes that the ensuing years turned euphoria rancid - into hubris. The massacre of eleven Israelis competing in the 1972 Olympics in Munich was then a frightening echo of the Holocaust. The movie then captures all this and more in a quick montage of news clips encapsulating Israel's twenty-five years of existence leading up to that Yom Kippur afternoon now fifty years ago.

Third, to teach lessons from that time which have a bearing on events in Israel today. In interviews, Guy Nattiv describes the threat to Israel today as "The Yom Kippur of Democracy."

The movie introduces Golda Meir trudging into a room, sitting down at a table and lighting a cigarette as she begins testifying to the Agranat Commission. Chaired by Shimon Agranat, Chief Justice of Israel's Supreme Court, the Commission convened after the war to investigate why Israel had faced such a dire threat to its existence, seemingly unexpected and unprepared, and then paid such a terrible price. In nineteen days, twenty-eight-hundred soldiers died in battle, with eight-thousand wounded. These were staggering, gut-wrenching casualties for a nation of three-million citizens.

The Agranat Commission is the movie's moral compass. It also offers sharp contrast to the current Israeli government's eagerness to undermine the authority of the Supreme Court. Throughout the movie several scenes take place before the Agranat Commission. ...Not the most dramatic scene, but perhaps the most poignant and the most pertinent for our service this Yom Kippur afternoon.

Several scenes also take place in Golda's home. Golda was famous for hosting meetings with her cabinet members and military leaders, and serving them her homemade pastries. In the movie, wartime tension permeates every kitchen scene. During one kitchen scene, I turned to Alice and said, "Remember, we were living just up the street from Golda." Alice had been thinking this exact thought.

Our street was S'derot Ben Maimon. Our apartment was in the middle of one block. On the corner of the next block stood Golda's house, altogether modest except for the concrete wall surrounding it with a guard house in front. One street over from our apartment and up that block is the residence then occupied by Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, now the Prime Minister's residence occupied by Benjamin Netanyahu. As I've often said, "It's a small world, especially when you're Jewish."

But this is Jerusalem. Half way between our apartment and the Prime Minister's residence is a neighborhood cafe. In 2002, during the Second Intifada, a Hamas suicide bomber entered the cafe and detonated the explosive device concealed in his clothing. Eleven people were killed, fifty-four injured.

But this too is Jerusalem. Every Shabbat, a sublime hush envelops Jerusalem...how much the more so on that Shabbat, Yom Kippur, the Shabbat of Shabbats, in 1973.

When the morning service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion concluded early afternoon, I returned to our apartment during the break before the afternoon service, Yizkor and Neila. Shortly after 2 o'clock, air raid sirens shattered the Holy Day's sublime hush. Within moments, the unthinkable for Shabbat happened, even more for this Shabbat of Shabbats: the sound of cars racing through the streets. Dumbfounded, I stepped out onto our *mirpeset*, the little balcony that is a feature of every apartment in Israel. Our neighbor in the apartment across the hall was out on her *mirpeset*, both of us trying to make sense of the sirens and the speeding cars. She said, "It's probably a *nisayon*," meaning a "test." By calling it a *nisayon*, a "test," she meant to be reassuring, but events proved her prophetic. The greatest test in the history of the modern state of Israel had just begun.

There are no battlefield deaths depicted in the movie. But every time the number of casualties are reported to Golda, she takes out a little spiral-bound notebook and records them. Nor are there any grim battlefield scenes in the

movie. Rather, the movie portrays the battles with Golda and her generals in the Israeli command headquarters, communicating with the front lines.

From the south, we hear the frantic radio reports from the soldiers being overwhelmed by the Egyptian army along the Bar Lev Line. Israel had built the Bar Lev Line to be impregnable, but the Egyptian armies destroyed it in two hours. From the north, we hear panic-stricken Israeli tank commanders outnumbered on the Golan Heights by Syrian tanks eighteen to one. We hear explosions and cries, and then we hear silence. Israel musters a counter attack in the Sinai that is quickly routed. The Syrian army advances so far across the Golan Heights that the northern part of Israel is all but defenseless. Had Syria seized the initiative, its armies would have marched to Jerusalem in a few days. We see Golda absorbing all this in the command headquarters, then reeling in despair and muttering, "Armageddon."

Like everyone on the Homefront, Alice and I had no idea how desperate the situation was. The morning after Yom Kippur, the voice of wisdom and experience arrived at our door, our landlord Louis Ehrlich.

Louis and his wife Emma built our apartment building in 1928. Their residence was the roof top penthouse. Louis and Emma were exemplars of the intrepid pioneers who built the modern state of Israel. Louis was one of the American volunteers who served with General Allenby in the British Expeditionary Force that defeated the Turkish Army and wrested control of Jerusalem from the Ottoman Empire in 1917. Emma was the secretary for Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah. The history of modern Israel lived in their flesh and blood. I learned that Louis had relatives in my hometown in New Jersey, a few blocks from my home ... small world, especially when you're Jewish. Once when Alice and I were invited to their home for Shabbat tea, they had guests from the United States: longtime friends, Rabbi and Mrs. Aaron Ilson, the rabbi of Temple Sinai in Pittsburgh. What a remarkable foreshadowing that Shabbat tea would prove, the finger of God pointing us in a direction that we could perceive only in the years ahead, as the world grew smaller still because we are Jewish.

The morning after Yom Kippur, Louis came to our door to offer his wisdom and experience: cautionary measures, especially if Jordan, twenty-five miles away within easy range of Jerusalem, enters the war:

*Maintain a total blackout every night.

*Fill the bath tub and all available receptacles with water in case Jerusalem's water sources are sabotaged.

*Tape the windows. If explosions occur outside, the tape will stop the glass from shattering inside on us, or conversely to protect people outside if the building is bombed...God forbid.

*Finally, if sirens sound again, go down to the first floor apartment and sit on the floor in the inner hallway.

What you need to know is Israel made bomb shelters mandatory in all new buildings starting in 1951. But remember, our apartment was built in 1928.

If you are wondering, were we scared, you already know the answer.

The scariest twenty minutes came the next Shabbat. The scariest twenty-four hours came the day before the war ended.

One week after the war began, again on Shabbat afternoon, the sirens sounded. We hurried down to the first floor apartment, and sat down on the inner hallway floor with our neighbors, all of us silent, holding our breath. Suddenly we heard a "Boom," the kind you feel in your chest. I don't recall anyone saying anything. Our hearts were in our throats. Silence continued for a minute, another minute and another until twenty minutes after the first sirens sounded, the sirens sounded again, signaling all clear. The mysteries of those twenty minutes - why the first sirens and then the explosion - had made the minutes all the more frightening.

So we come to the movie's most dramatic scene, which also sets the stage for the war's most frightening twenty-four hours for Alice and me, for every Israeli and any American who followed events closely ... and perhaps, whether they knew it or not, for everyone on earth.

The war was reaching its conclusion. Israel was poised for a stunning victory. Egypt, Syria and their patron, the U.S.S.R., were facing an equally stunning defeat. Israel had trapped the Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai, cut off from all supplies.

The movie then recreates Golda receiving a phone call from Henry Kissinger, serving as the interlocutor not only between the belligerents, but also between the potential belligerents: the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., with associated and incalculably higher costs. Liev Schreiber, who is Jewish, offers a magnificent portrayal of Kissinger, his basso profundo voice and his preternatural arm-twisting. And Temple Emanuel should add a special star to Liev Schreiber as the title character, "Ray Donovan," the television series produced and directed by

David Hollander, a Temple Emanuel confirmand, and son of longtime Temple members, Tom and Barbara Hollander (may she rest in peace). It's a small world, especially when you're Jewish ... and especially talented.

During the phone conversation between the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, the camera draws closer as the tension grows higher, until Golda's face fills the whole screen.

Kissinger: "You are to open a humanitarian corridor through the desert to the Third Army, Golda. We cannot allow the thirty-thousand men to die of thirst.

Golda: "We will send them water when we've got our prisoners back..."

Kissinger: "I will try to arrange...."

Golda interrupts "... and Sadat agrees to direct talks with Israel, not the Zionist entity, Israel!"

Kissinger: "That would be tantamount to recognition."

Golda: "Yes."

Kissinger: "He would never agree to that. The Arab world will turn against him."

Golda: "If he doesn't, I will order my planes to attack. All those men will die, all of them."

Kissinger: "Such an act would force Sadat from power. He'd be hanged in Tahrir Square."

Golda: "Well that thought should focus his mind."

Kissinger: "He'd be replaced by a Soviet hardliner. You know this for a fact."

Golda: "You mean a madman bent on the destruction of Israel?"

Kissinger: "The Russians are on high alert. They are preparing eleven airborne divisions. Do you understand?"

Golda interrupts again: "Do you think I don't know that? Let me tell you about the Russians, Henry. When I was a child in Ukraine, at Christmas time my father would board up the windows of our house to protect us from Cossacks who would get drunk and attack Jews. They would beat Jews to death in the streets for fun. My father would hide us in the cellar. And we stayed silent, hoping the killers would pass us by. ... My father's face, Henry, I will never forget that look. All he wanted was to protect his children. I am not that little girl hiding in the cellar."

I do not know if this conversation took place word for word. Last week, Alice called our friends in Israel, Amnon and Masha, to wish them Shana Tova. Alice asked if they've seen "Golda." They have. Amnon has always been secretive about his career in the I.D.F. - we surmise he was in Intelligence - but he did offer that the movie was largely true...that he "lived it." And the whole world grows ever smaller.

But I do know what I did know fifty years ago when we were holding our breath for twenty-four frightening hours.

Yes, the Russians were ready to send a massive army into the fray.

In response, President Nixon had raised the military alert for U.S. forces to DefCon III, two stages above normal readiness and two stages from nuclear war.

And although the movie portrays Golda thwarting one of her commanders from readying Israel's nuclear weapons, history records that Golda herself issued the nuclear arms alert as early as the third day of the Yom Kippur War. So for those twenty-four hours before war's end one word hung over our heads: "Armageddon."

After reliving all this in the movie "Golda," you'll understand why "Oppenheimer" is not a movie Alice and I care to see.

Sadat accepted Golda's terms the next day.

The most poignant moment in "Golda," comes toward the end when Golda finishes her testimony to the Agranat Commission. She gets up from her chair and looks back at the five Commissioners. She then professes her deep regret for not following her gut and ordering a preemptive strike against Egypt and Syria. It would have saved lives.

Regret. "Regret" is one of the words that the spirit of Yom Kippur hangs over our heads. We may never have thought of "regret" as such before, painful as it is, but "regret" can be healing. "The Power of Regret" is the latest of Daniel Pink's seven books to make *The New York Times* Best Sellers List. Pink also is Jewish. His career began writing for *The Torch*, The Bexley High School student newspaper in Columbus, Ohio, as I've learned from Pink's contemporary at Bexley High, and now longtime Temple member and past vice-president, Marcy Bernson. The world grows smaller so many ways. "The Power of Regret" is subtitled "How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward." Together they convey the essence of the book.

Regret can be healing when it helps turn our *mishugas* and mistakes of the past into our *menschlichkeit* in the present and for the future. There is also

another word coming to us from high above intended for deep within: *T'Shuva*. *T'shuva* takes regret and puts it in our heart. Even when past mistakes cannot be corrected, *T'shuva* makes us all the more a mensch, like Golda.

After she expressed her deep regret to the Agranat Commission, Golda said, "I will carry the memory of all of those soldiers with me to my grave." And then Golda, the school teacher from Milwaukee who earned the nickname, "The Iron Lady of Israel" as Prime Minister, who inspired Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel to attain their nations' political pinnacles, and motivated women worldwide to achieve the previously impossible, then barked at the Commissioners, "Don't put that in your report."

The Agranat Commission would clear Golda of any wrongdoing in the run up to the war. Four senior military intelligence officers were guilty of various charges that can be summed up in that damning word in the movie's prologue: hubris. Nonetheless, the public perception in Israel was that Golda allowed Israel to be attacked in the misguided belief it would curry world sympathy. In fact, Golda's hand was stayed by President Nixon's insistence not to start the war.

Setting the record straight about Golda's role in the run up to the war was the first reason director Guy Nattiv made the movie. The movie also fulfilled his second reason: to document the Yom Kippur War's dramatic, traumatic impact on Israel. Israel did not celebrate its amazing victory. Israel mourned.

The movie's closing credits rolled across the screen, accompanied by Leonard Cohen's song, "Who By Fire," the stirring interpretation of *U'netaneh Tokef*. Leonard Cohen came to Israel during the Yom Kippur War and traveled the Sinai entertaining the troops. His journey is documented in a new book which author Matti Friedman titled "Who By Fire." The book's cover alone tells a story so timely today. It is a photograph of Leonard Cohen surrounded by Israeli soldiers. Like so many of the photographs of the soldiers who fought in the Yom Kippur War, *Kippot*, *Yarmulkes* and *Tzitzit* are nowhere to be seen.

Thus the third and last reason Guy Nattiv made this movie: to address what he named "The Yom Kippur of Democracy." The Yom Kippur War was an external threat to Israel's existence. The Yom Kippur of Democracy now poses an internal threat.

Mandatory conscription began in 1948 for Jewish men and women turning eighteen. Exemptions exist for two groups: Israeli Arabs and Haredi Jews, both of whom may voluntarily enlist. Haredi Jews are often identified as Ultra-

Orthodox, a name they disdain. If you've come across their preferred name and wondered, Haredi means "Tremblers," those according to Psalms who tremble in the presence of God. In Pennsylvania, we'd call them "Quakers." Yes, Jews with Tzitzit hanging over their belts and Kippot on their heads and under their helmets have served throughout Israel's history, including the Yom Kippur War. But while the Haredim have grown - God bless them dramatically - to about ten-percent of Israel's population, (and remember that eighteen percent of Israel's population are Arab Muslims and Christians) the percent of Haredim who volunteer to serve in the Army continues to dwindle, now down to about ten-percent of Haredi men when they turn eligible.

This is an issue that the Israeli Supreme Court has tried to correct by reinforcing conscription laws, which the Haredim resist and defy. They believe that their study of Torah preserves Israel's well-being equal to military service. They have further reasons to tie the hands of the Supreme Court.

Students in Haredi yeshivot receive significant government stipends. The current government coalition expects to raise them by thirty-one percent. When Haredi men also choose Torah study over gainful employment, if their family has four or more children they receive significant tax breaks. These policies not only disincentivize serving in the army. They also force secular Israelis to pay six times more taxes than the Haredim.

For thirty-eight weeks and counting, tens of thousands of Israelis have gathered every *Motza-ei Shabbat*, Saturday evening, in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and elsewhere across Israel to protest these inequities and more. Just up the block and one street over from where Alice and I lived in Jerusalem is a favorite place for the protestors: outside the Prime Minister's residence. Alice and I have been there and done that. This past Saturday night, the protestors were bereaved families who lost loved ones in the Yom Kippur War.

The Times of Israel recently reported, "Over and over, protestors tell interviewers variations of the same story: I'm doing this for my father who was wounded in the Yom Kippur War, for my son who was killed in Lebanon, for my grandparents who were uprooted from Iraq or who survived the Holocaust, for my great-grandparents who helped build the state. Now, they say, it's my turn to defend the country."

When the credits stopped rolling and Leonard Cohen's "Who By Fire" ended, the theater lights came on. Alice then asked, with chagrin, "Why are we the only people here?" My initial thought was on a rainy Wednesday night in a

backwater suburb somewhere west of Hartford, Connecticut, I'm not surprised. But I said, "I don't know, but I'll think about it." I've now thought about it long and hard, and I'd like to offer the following as an epilogue, based on the old quip, "Why does a Jew always answer a question, with another question? Why not?"

So I'll answer Alice's question with another question, the Torah's first question, the question God asked Adam and Eve, because it's a small world, especially when you're Jewish....

Ayeka? "Where are you?" Where are you on this Yom Kippur, this Yom Kippur of Democracy?

For you who are Jews by choice, do you know that you are recognized as Jews in Israel because of the rulings of the Israeli Supreme Court, rulings that our Reform Movement have forcefully and effectively advocated, rulings that those now in power in the Israeli government have long sought to overturn, if only they had the power, which they now do?

Do all of you know that these same players believe that Reform Judaism is not really Judaism and that Reform Jews are not really Jewish?

Do all of you know that they cite our embrace of non-Jews in our synagogues, our families and our hearts as proof?

Do all of you know that they scorn our support for the life decisions made by LGBTQ+ persons as further proof?

I can tell you how we must not respond. - By answering vilification with vilification. It's a small world, but relative to all others we are a very small people. We have endured history's many challenges by centripetal force pushing us together, not centrifugal force spinning us apart.

I will tell you how we can respond.... By each of us finding ways to bridge the gaps. For me, I have devoted years of research and writing to updating the 613 Mitzvot. Retirement provides me with the opportunity to make progress. God willing, I will live long enough to complete the task. The Mitzvot exist to unite the Jewish people in uniting all peoples. It's a small world, but here are eight-billion people created in God's image.

I cannot tell you your way to bridge the gaps. But I can recommend some people who can help you find it. Rabbi Aaron Meyer has an amazing way of teaching and leading and modeling and loving. How much I admire and how often I myself have learned from him about Israel by what he says and what he doesn't say. He can help you find your unique and God-given way to bridge the

gaps. And if you think you might bridge the gaps through music, you have an amazing and gifted treasure in Cantor Kalix Jacobson.

Together with Jews in synagogues across this small world on this most sacred of days, we now unite in *S'lichot u'Vidui*, "Forgiveness and Confession."

Rabbi Mark Joel Mahler
Yom Kippur, 5784/2023