

Hayom Katzeyr

"The existence of Israel has continued too long. We welcome the Israeli aggression. We welcome the battle we have long awaited. The peak hour has come. The battle has come in which we shall destroy Israel." This was a defining statement made on Cairo Radio, May 16, 1967.

On May 17, President Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping. On May 26, 1967, Abba Eban pleaded with President Johnson for intervention and Johnson said his hands were tied and could do nothing. On June 5th, Israel attacked Egypt in a pre-emptive strike and by June 10th, Israel had achieved a stunning victory over Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

On May 16, 1967, I was preparing a term paper on Demosthenes for a course in Greek History I was taking at UCLA as I completed my junior year. I couldn't write. I couldn't think about anything but what I had heard on the news. Israel was on the brink of another war.

Israel, a country that I had heard about from my teachers at religious school; Israel, the location to where all our prayers had been directed for nearly two thousand years according to my rabbi; Israel, the place where the music of the chalutzim, the pioneers, stirred my soul and spirit; Israel, was where I wanted to be. I wanted to go fight for her right to exist.

I came home from the Powell Library and woke my parents up. I told them I wanted to go to Israel and fight. My quiet, demure mother looked at me as if I

had lost my mind and screamed: “GEVALT! He’s been drinking!” My father, never one to be outdone by my mother, said: “ISRAEL, ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND, IT’S DANGEROUS THERE! – I am paying your tuition and you will finish college. Enough! Go to bed.”

As I sulked my way to my room fifteen feet from theirs, I thought, I don’t think I handled that well. As I came to terms with reality and understood that on my \$10.00 a week allowance and the pittance I earned as a Bar Mitzvah tutor, I was not going to Israel anytime soon.

My dream was to become a cantor. I envisioned a very active cantorate, not only filled with music, but Jewish education and a very deep commitment to Israel. I applied to the Hebrew Union College for admission into their cantorial program and was accepted. I began my studies in Los Angeles and transferred to New York. On August 26, 1968, the day after Karen and I married, we drove across the country for our honeymoon so I could begin classes in New York fourteen days later. Those first days in New York are a sermon in itself which I will share at another time.

HUC as we refer to our Alma Mater, did not send students to Israel in those days for their first year. In fact, I well remember the day Dr. Nelson Gleuck, alav hashalom, then President of the College, came and announced at Chapel services that beginning in 1969, all future classes of rabbis would begin their studies with a year in Israel. It took almost fifteen years more for my cantorial colleagues to

have the same privilege. It was not until the early 70's that Karen and I made our way to Israel for the first time leading a NFTY trip.

There, we landed and I remember getting off the El Al plane and kissing the tarmac. No, I didn't have pontifical aspirations, but rather I was so moved that I had finally made it to Israel. For six weeks we had the opportunity to learn with the teens we were leading. We climbed Masada to view the sunrise, we imagined ourselves as crusaders at Belvoir, we tanned ourselves on the beach in Taba as caravans of Bedouin and their camels walked by on land that was won during the Six Day War. We camped in the Sinai. We climbed Jebel Musa, the Mountain of Moses, or what some think is Mt. Sinai. I conducted four b'not Mitzvah as the sun rose atop that mountain and Israeli jet fighters passed below us as I was offering the priestly blessing to those girls.

Each time I visit the State of Israel, I am reminded of the sacrifice of our people to pray in our own holy land, Eretz Yisrael. Each time I stand and sing the Hatikvah with our religious school children, I am reminded of the many visits I have made. Each time I stand before our Holy Ark and face Jerusalem, I remember that for two thousand years our people have directed their prayers towards that holy place. Each time I consider Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel, I am reminded that Jacob-Yisrael, wrestled with God and that each of us must wrestle with ourselves as we consider our future as a people and as active and participating Jews. It is that struggle, that wrestling-that vision of a people and a land redeemed with a unique message to the peoples of the world that inspires me and urges me to continue building Jewish community.

