

**A Fourth of July Yahrzeit Revisited**  
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I still remember the moment as if it were yesterday. The date was exactly 40 years ago this coming Monday: A bright, sunny day, sitting in my parents' kitchen. I turned on the radio and heard the miraculous news: 103 hostages, threatened with execution by pro-Palestinian terrorists, had been rescued by Israeli commandos at Entebbe airport in Uganda.

That date was notable on the American calendar as well: July 4, 1976, the bicentennial of American independence. So a great celebration in America coincided with great rejoicing in Israel and in the worldwide Jewish community.

Operation Entebbe, as it came to be known, was an overwhelming success, but the loss was great as well, for Yonatan "Yoni" Netanyahu, commander of the raid and its principle architect, was killed. He was the only Israeli soldier to die that day.

Thus this Monday, the Fourth of July 2016, marks both America's annual birthday celebration, and Yoni's 40<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit, not on the Jewish calendar, but on the calendar we follow here in America.

I first noted this yahrzeit 13 years ago in another summer Dvar Torah here at Temple Emunah. Today I'd like to revisit that yahrzeit remembrance and reflect on how both Yoni's pessimism about, and enthusiasm for Israel, mirror my own feelings.

This week of Parshat Shelah Lecha, with its story of the spies and their report, is an appropriate time for these reflections. On the one hand, the majority of spies in the story have reported that the land of Israel is controlled by giants, and the people wail in response that they would be better off back in Egypt. On the other hand, two of the spied, Caleb and Joshua retort that "The Lord is with us; have no fear of those people." JStreet and AIPAC are new kids on the block when it comes to the right way to think about the land of Israel.

Israel first came into my consciousness, as best I can recall, during the 1967 Six Day War, when I was 11 years old. I was at Hebrew School one afternoon that fateful June week, and the teachers were incredibly nervous, filled with dread. The combined armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, the perceived Anakim or giants of their day, had threatened to drive the Jews into the sea.

Then, at my bar mitzvah, I was given a copy of the ethical will my grandfather Morris had written to my oldest cousin David, to be shared with each of his younger cousins when they reached "the age of full understanding." In that letter, Morris recalled growing up in Palestine and coming to America as a young man. In his desire to connect his grandchildren with Eretz Yisrael, he wrote:

[In my estate plan] I have inserted a provision to increase the share of anyone willing to study in Israel. One of my primary wishes is that my grandchildren should have opportunities to learn about and continue in Jewish lore. I cannot conceive of a better opportunity than to live and study in the truly Jewish atmosphere to be found in Israel.

Seven years later, in April 1976, I fulfilled my grandfather's wish. I travelled for a month across the length and breadth of Israel. Most importantly, I met many cousins, the descendants of my grandfather's siblings. I felt deeply connected to the land, to the Jewish people, and to our shared history.

Less than three months later came the hijacking of an Air France plane over Europe by Arab and German gunmen on June 27, 1976. The plane eventually landed in Entebbe, Uganda, where President Idi Amin was waiting for the terrorists and received them with open arms. Exactly one week later, on July 4, the hostages were freed in the daring raid that cost Yonatan Netanyahu his life.

Yoni left behind a remarkable record of his life and thoughts in the form of letters he had written over the years to family and friends.

Within one year after Yoni's death, his brothers had compiled hundreds of these letters written from just after Yoni's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday until a few days before his death in Uganda at the age of 30. The letters were published in book form in 1978 as *Mikhtevai Yoni*, "Yoni's Letters," and became an immediate best seller in Israel.

One year after that, in July 1979, my life intersected with Yoni's story again. My wife Wendy and I, recently married, arrived in Israel for a year of study and work through the WUJS Institute. Again, I was fulfilling my grandfather's wish that I should deepen my connection with *Eretz Yisrael* and *Am Yisrael*.

At WUJS, I received my own copy of *Mikhtevai Yoni*. My Hebrew was just good enough that I was able to work my way through a number of the letters in our ulpan class. In this way I first began to know Yoni.

When Wendy and I returned to Boston in 1980 I found that Yoni's letters had been translated into English. At that point, I read all of the letters and more fully understood Yoni's brilliant intellect and life struggles, his world-view and his love of Israel. On Yoni's Fourth of July Yahrzeit, let me share a little of Yoni with you.

Yoni was clearly no ordinary soldier. When other soldiers were too tired after exhausting hikes, to read even "cheap Westerns and trashy novels," Yoni was delving into philosophy and physics and history.

From his earliest letters and over the next 13 years, Yoni continually expresses his deep connection to *Eretz Yisrael* and his love of the land.

Through Yoni's letters, I have also come to appreciate the commitment of all who serve in the Israeli Defense Forces, and the continual, daily efforts of those protecting the country. For example, Yoni described, in his first year in the army, standing guard on Erev Rosh Hashanah:

It's extraordinary, the distance between soldier and civilian. In town people are having parties. In brightly lit rooms there is music, and people stay up until morning. I, too, was up until morning, the only difference being that I was lying on the ground on a dark cold night without a single ray of light to brighten my surroundings, alert to every suspicious sound and movement around me. When you lie like this without moving hour after hour in a cloud of mosquitos,... your eyes begin to close and you have to struggle with the desire to lay your head on the ground, to which your body has been joined for hours, and drift into deep sleep.

Yoni impressed me as a Zionist and as a soldier, but I have been most touched by his insights into Israel's existential reality and his long view of Jewish history. Yoni could alternately, be deeply discouraged and pessimistic, and at other times wildly exhilarated.

Allow me to share two more excerpts from *Mikhtevai Yoni* to illustrate:

The first, darker example is from 1968 when Yoni was recovering from an injury he had suffered during the Six Day War. At the age of 22, Yoni wrote words that I'm afraid to say, ring as true today as they probably did when first written. Yoni writes to his parents:

A kind of sadness has overtaken me which doesn't leave me. It doesn't control me or direct my actions, but it is inside me, it exists, sunk in a well-hidden corner deep in my being. This isn't exactly an emptiness, but something with a very heavy deposit – a sort of "heavy emptiness."

When I try to understand why this is so, and why this feeling has grown within me, I reach the conclusion that not only the war, the killing, the deaths, the wounds and disabilities are to blame – these can be overcome. Their imprint may perhaps be dulled by time.

The real cause is the sense of helplessness in the face of war that has no end. The war has not ended, and it seems to me that it will go on and on. The June [1967] war was only one campaign. It's continuing right now, today, yesterday, and tomorrow. It continues with every mine and killing and murder, with every explosion in Jerusalem and every shot in the north or the south.

This is the "quiet" before the next storm. I've no doubt that war will come. Nor do I doubt that we will win. But for how long? Until when? We can't wipe out the Arab people; they are too many and have too much support.

Deep within my being, I'm convinced of this. Hence the sadness I referred to earlier, the sadness of young men destined for endless war.

My second example is, fortunately, more uplifting, and comes from Erev Pesach 1975. I've shared this letter of Yoni's at my own Passover Seder because Yoni so perfectly encapsulates a view of the holiday that deeply resonates with me – themes of freedom and of family and of the continuity of the Jewish people. Yoni wrote as follows:

Tomorrow is Passover.

I've always thought it the most wonderful of all our holidays. It's an ancient celebration of freedom – a thousands-of-years-old liberty. When I sail back over the seas of our history, I pass through long years of suffering, of oppression, of massacres, many years that, in a historical perspective, seem devoid of any ray of light – yet it isn't so. For the fact that the idea of freedom remained, that the hope persisted, that the flame of liberty continued to burn through the observance of this ancient festival, is to me testimony of the eternity of the striving for freedom and the idea of freedom in Israel.

I also have a special feeling about Passover because of the Seder, which for me, as for all of us, stirs up personal memories of the past. I clearly remember one Seder in Jerusalem when I was six. Among the guests were Rabbi Binyamin and Professor Klausner, and my father was there too, and others I don't remember, and there was a big table and much light, and I was in a completely perfect world, and I kept absorbing it and absorbing it. Storing up impressions of a great and beautiful world with myself in it – taking it in, as it were, to sort it all out in adulthood – yet today I know it wasn't in order to sort it out, but to treasure it that I took it all in.

Last year I celebrated Seder with my men in a big tent near a tel in the Syrian enclave that was being shelled, and that too was a wonderful Seder in its way.

[As I think about Passover,] I find myself in my past. Yet by “past” I mean not only my own past, but the way in which I see myself as an inseparable part, a link in the chain of our existence and Israel’s independence.

In these two excerpts, ranging from Yoni’s despair over “endless war” to his inspiring personal “Hagaddah,” Yoni speaks to my own angst over the moral complexity of Israel’s “matzav”, Israel’s situation.

Ari Shavit sums it up well for me in the subtitle of his bestselling book “My Promised Land,” when he speaks of both the *triumph* and the *tragedy* of Israel. Shavit depicts the Zionist revolution’s miraculous accomplishments: reclaiming and cultivating the land, rescuing a people devastated by the Holocaust, building a robust entrepreneurial economy, and creating an artistic and cultural renaissance. But he also shares the tremendous costs, especially to the Palestinian Arabs. For as Shavit writes, referring to Lydda, the Arab city that was depopulated by the Israeli army in the summer of 1948, “If Zionism was to be, Lydda could not be. If Lydda was to be, Zionism could not be.”

What would Yoni make of Israel today, now 40 years after Entebbe? What advice would he give to us, or to his younger brother Bibi, Israel’s current Prime Minister?

And what would Caleb and Joshua say if they were sent as spies to assess the land today? Would they carry back word of the latest Israeli company being listed on NASDAQ, or the desperate cry of Palestinian teens like those I met on my visit to Ramallah, who pleaded for some way out of the prison they felt they were living in?

My daughter Liora emailed me yesterday from Israel to report that this weekend’s *Haaretz*, marking the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Entebbe, is totally full of stories about Yoni and the daring rescue. One article particularly caught my attention, because it reminded me of Yoni’s letter about Passover and the celebration of liberty.

An actual survivor of the hostage crisis in Entebbe who was 16 at the time of the rescue, wrote an op-ed with the headline: “Were we really liberated at Entebbe?” She writes, provocatively:

40 years have passed since then. Some of the scars that remained I have discovered only with time. When I returned it was hard to talk about the fear, the trauma, because there was a happy ending, what a victory, what happiness.

But death was close there, and it stays with me. And the occupation also remains. And brings more and more death upon all of us. We can do something to bring this to an end, to dismantle settlements and end the occupation.

And then [she concludes] we can really talk really about liberation.

For myself, I’m caught in the middle. I am slow to criticize my Israeli cousins who defend the continued settlement building and occupation, because I understand they live in a tough region of the world, and they walk different streets than me. But I also can’t bring myself to jump on the pro-Israel bandwagon, defending the state no matter what position the current government espouses or what ministers it appoints or what version of Judaism it considers valid.

Let me close with words from Yoni’s last letter written on June 29, 1976, just two days before he was called to begin planning the raid on Entebbe and five days before his death. He wrote “I find myself at a

critical stage in my life, facing a profound inner crisis that has been disturbing my whole frame of reference for a long time.”

Yoni recalled the mad, miserable cry of a play he had seen long ago: “Stop the world, I want to get off!”

But, he wrote, “it isn’t possible to stop the mad globe we’re moving on, and the force of gravity won’t let us escape its pull, and so, willy-nilly, alive or dead (alive, of course, and as long as possible), you’re in.”

Despite his despair, Yoni concludes his final letter with the classic Israeli sign-off “Ye-hiyeh B’seder. It’ll be okay.”

Today, I hear Yoni’s words echoing through time, telling us some combination of “It is what it is” and “No matter what, we’ll get through this.”

I come back full circle to where I started. Two days from now, the Fourth of July 2016, will be Yoni’s 40<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit*.

May we pause for a moment on Yoni’s *yahrzeit* to remember this remarkable Israeli hero – a soldier’s soldier, an ardent Zionist, and an insightful philosopher of Israel and of the complex times in which we live. *Zichrono li’vracha*. May his memory be a blessing that inspires us to both reflection and action.