

# Yom Kippur Lessons from Three Great Zionist Leaders

**O**ur High Holiday liturgy is replete with petitions to Hashem to return us to Eretz Yisrael. We find this in every Amidah, in our Selichot prayers, and we even conclude Yom Kippur with l'shana haba'ah b'Yerushalayim. In my sermons, I have often focused on using the inspiration of Yom Kippur to connect to the Land of Israel. This article follows a similar approach.

This past summer our family enjoyed a fabulous summer in Israel. It was a marathon. Hikes, tours, galleries, synagogues, tunnels, kibbutzim, army bases, look-outs. I came home wiped. Even my kids were *farmisht!*

## Three Museums, Three Extraordinary Individuals

One of the highlights of this trip was seeing and experiencing three great museums. Remarkably, all were designed by the same individual. Each took a little over an hour to see but the quality of the exhibits and the educational value was second to none.

What was the common denominator among these three museums? For me it was an appreciation for three exalted personalities in the history of Modern Zionism. It is these larger-than-life people that I would like to focus on.

The Herzl Museum shares the illuminating story of Binyamin Ze'ev Herzl. Located just a short walk from



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his grave site, the museum tells his story.

Born in 1860, a proud and cultured European, Herzl paid little attention to his Jewish roots. But as a journalist in Paris during the Dreyfus Affair, he was outraged. He came to realize that rampant anti-Semitism haunts the secular Jew no less than the religious Jew.

In 1896 he published a small pamphlet called "The Jewish State." In it, he presents his vision for the establishment of an independent state for the Jewish People in a place yet to be determined. A year later, in 1897, he convened 197 delegates to the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. The World Zionist Organization was established. The next year, 360 attended the Congress. The year after that, 1,300 attended. Soon after, The Jewish National Fund was founded (1901). He traveled extensively, meeting with prime ministers, caesars and sultans desperately looking for someone to approve his charter for a Jewish State. Many are unaware that Herzl passed

away at the young age of 44. He did not realize his dream. But he was the first modern Jewish leader to put the "Jewish problem" on the world agenda.

The second museum that we visited was the Palmach Museum located near the campus of Tel Aviv University.

The Palmach was the strike force of the Haganah, the pre-state underground defense organization that was eventually incorporated into the Israel Defense Forces after 1948.

More of an experience than a museum tour (using incredible special effects), the exhibits bring to life what it was like to train and fight as a member of the Palmach.

But being that last year was the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, the second modern Zionist leader that I would like to highlight is the man who was responsible for the organization of a Jewish military organization in the modern world. Zev Jabotinsky.

For Jews who were ever familiar with pogroms, inquisitions, blood libels,



# SACRIFICE NOTHING



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massacres and persecutions, the idea of organized self defense was unthinkable ... until Jabotinsky.

Coming on the heels of Herzl, Jabotinsky wrote extensively about the misery and vulnerability of the Jews in the exile. He spoke unabashedly about Jewish Nationalism. The need for a Jewish State in Palestine.

He represented the “new” Jew. Fiercely proud of his ancient culture. Free of the fears and inferiorities of the ghetto. Fully capable of meeting the non-Jew on equal terms.

During World War I he was a prime mover in bringing about the Jewish Legion (in the British Army), which would help conquer Palestine. He created the Haganah. He founded Betar, the 80,000-member Zionist youth organization that trained its constituents in military discipline and skills.

In the 1930’s, Jabotinsky told the Jews of Warsaw, “liquidate the diaspora or the diaspora will surely liquidate you.”

Jabotinsky understood the importance of protecting the lives and property of the Jewish People. He felt strongly about the personal dignity and honor of Am Yisrael.

Although he died in 1940 at the young age of 60, he had the foresight to realize that a Jewish State would require a strong military to defend itself.

The third museum that I visited was the Menachem Begin Heritage Center. This was arguably the crown jewel of the three.

Having escaped from the Nazis in Poland, imprisoned by the Soviets in Siberia, and hunted by the British Mandatory Government while leading the Irgun, Menachem Begin barely appeared as someone destined for longevity, let alone destiny! But of course, as we all know, he became the sixth prime minister of the State of Israel.

At one point on the tour we found ourselves in a room standing behind

metal barricades, participating in an enormous election rally, listening to Begin giving one of his rousing speeches.

Menachem Begin was one of a kind. A student of Jabotinsky, he believed that the right of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel was a “natural, eternal right that cannot be challenged.” He expanded Jewish settlements in Judea, Samaria, the Golan Heights and Gaza. He said “ours is a might to right not a right to might.”

With all the peace talks of the past two decades, it’s worth noting how Menachem Begin (in 1981) responded to the United States upon being informed that Israel would be “punished” for incorporating the Golan Heights into Israel.

Begin issued a statement that he read to the United States Ambassador to Israel and subsequently issued it to the public:

*A week ago, at the instance of the Government, the Knesset passed on*



*all three readings by an overwhelming majority of two-thirds, the "Golan Heights Law." Now you once again declare that you are punishing Israel. What kind of expression is this — "punishing Israel"? Are we a vassal state of yours? Are we a banana republic? Are we youths of fourteen who, if they don't behave properly, are slapped across the fingers?*

*Let me tell you who this government is composed of. It is composed of people whose lives were spent in resistance, in fighting and in suffering. You will not frighten us with "punishments." He who threatens us will find us deaf to his threats. We are only prepared to listen to rational arguments. ...*

*As regards the future, please be kind enough to inform the Secretary of State that the Golan Heights Law will remain valid. There is no force on earth that can bring about its rescission.*

## Asking Ourselves the Tough Questions

Why do I share with you the lives of

these three larger-than-life individuals in the context of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year?

Because it provides an opportunity to think about our own standing in the world. As a People. As individuals.

Herzl analyzed the Jewish condition. He sacrificed his family fortune to pursue a vision for the Jewish People.

Let us each ask ourselves: Where is my head this Yom Kippur? Am I only focused on myself or am I paying attention to the larger concerns of my people? Am I a good ambassador for the State of Israel? Do I speak up when opportunities arise? Am I involved with institutions in Eretz Yisrael? Am I a supporter of yeshivot and centers of Jewish education that keep the Holy Land spiritually vibrant?

At the same time, how am I doing in my personal life? I may not be able to build a Jewish homeland but am I building a Jewish home? I may not be hawkish but am I militant about my

observance of the commandments? I may not be prepared to sit in prison for my belief but am I willing to experience discomfort for my faith?

What are my achievements? How is my personal voyage? Where can I improve? What can I be doing to make a difference in the coming year?

When someone fills out an application for an important job, one of the questions he/she must answer is, "Why do you want this job?" Similarly, when we petition Hashem: "zochreinu l'chaim — Remember us for life — we too must explain why we want this, why we are deserving of another year of life.

And when we make that plea before Hashem, we should do so with sincerity. Our Sages teach us:

אע"פ ששערי תפלה ננעלו שערי דמעות לא ננעלו.

*Even though the gates of prayer are locked, the gates of tears are not locked.*

**Baba Metzia 59a**

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## Long-Term Commitments

The tenacity and commitment of Herzl, Jabotinsky and Begin to their cause is a lesson we can apply to our teshuva process. The accomplishments of these leaders didn't take place in a single day. They worked day in and day out for their cause. If we want our teshuva to be successful, we too have to make it a long-term commitment.

The Talmud tells us:

רבי אליעזר אומר שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך  
שאלו תלמידיו את ר"א וכי אדם יודע איזהו  
יום ימות אמר להן וכל שכן ישוב היום שמא  
ימות למחר ונמצא כל ימיו בתשובה.

*Rabbi Eliezer taught: Repent one day before your death. His students questioned him: Does one really know when they will die? Rabbi Eliezer answered: All the more reason to repent today, lest one die tomorrow, and one will spend one's entire life dedicated to repentance.*

**Shabbat 153a**

One major benefit of repenting daily is that it safeguards a person from being involved in more serious sins. Usually, a career of sin begins with one small act. The Talmud, *Arachin* 30b, teaches that the first time a person does something forbidden, his conscience is usually troubled. By the second time, it becomes habit, *na'aseh lo k'heter* (in one's own eyes it is made to be permissible). If we review our behavior often then we are more likely to stop sins before they become habit.

I once heard that Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev would sit down nightly with a paper and pen and review his actions for that day. He would make a list, review it and say: "I did some things today that were wrong. I won't let them happen again tomorrow."

## Taking Action

Herzl, Jabotinsky and Begin were all people of action. They didn't just talk about what they were going to do. They did it.

In Sefer Tehillim (34:13) we are taught: "*Sur merah, va'aseh tov*," turn away from evil and do good. Merely regretting our transgressions of the past is not enough. By discarding our sins we only fulfill the first half of King David's directive — *sur merah*. The key is to follow through on the second half as well — *aseh tov*. Chart a new course of action for yourself.

Say to yourself: What concrete actions can I take to change from being the person I've been to the person I wish to become? I might be committing to attend services every day or every Shabbat, concentrating more on prayers, or allotting more time for Torah study.

Two weeks after Yom Kippur is Simchat Torah. At that time, we will start to read the Torah all over again. Here is an opportunity to take it upon oneself to study the weekly Torah portion with greater rigor over the course of this coming year.

Do those things you always said you wanted to do. Be that person you said you always wanted to be. Think of the impact you want to have in the limited years that God gives us to walk this earth.

There are numerous volunteer opportunities available to us. We can use our call to action to commit ourselves to visiting the sick or homebound individuals, inviting people in need of company to a Shabbat meal or helping one of the local institutions. We can also commit to spending more time with our family.

## Having the Proper Attitude

Being action-oriented is not only about doing what it right, but doing it with the proper attitude.

I once heard a beautiful insight from Rabbi Paysach Krohn — said over in the name of the great *ba'al mussar*, Rav Elya Lopian.

Rav Elya depicts the scenes in two different stores adjacent to one another. The building on the right is a hardware store. The observer enters the store, it is Erev Pesach and the scene is extremely hectic. People are rushing through the aisles frantically doing their last-minute shopping. One wants dishes, a second needs light bulbs, a third is returning

damaged goods. The people behind the counter have their hands full trying to cope with the mild hysteria of the customers' demands. An observer notices a teenage boy who at first seems to be helping to stack some merchandise, then he is helping a customer carry her packages to her car, and then he returns, hurries behind the counter to see where else he could be of assistance. He seems to be everywhere. The observer wonders who this boy is and which of the many jobs that he is attending to, are actually his responsibility.

The same person then goes next door to the building on the left. This one is a grocery store. Here too, he observes people rushing about for the last-minute items. Bedlam rules as one person buys fish, another matzah, a third grape juice and a fourth is trying to pay her bill. Here too, the aisles are crowded with shoppers. The owners and workers don't know where to turn to first.

In the back of the store there is a young man, about the same age as the boy in the hardware store, who is sitting quietly doing the bookkeeping. He sits calmly amid the storm of noise, oblivious to everything else as he proceeds with his work. Once again, the observer can't help but wonder. Why doesn't this young fellow come forward to help with the

customers? How could he sit there so calmly?

Upon inquiring, the observer finds out that the teenager in the first store is the owner's son. Customers gratefully describe him as someone who is always around to help. He has a keen sense of where to be and is always available to fill the gap where it's required. You don't have to tell him every little thing. The young man in the second store is a paid employee. One customer described him this way: "He shows up to work at 9 am and leaves at 5 pm. He does what he is told and nothing more."

Says Rav Elya Lopian: at times the Jewish People are lovingly referred as "*banim*," children of Hashem. Yet at other times they are described as "*avadim*," servants of Hashem. What is the difference between a loyal son and a dutiful servant? Both do their jobs and take care of their obligations. But a son runs with enthusiasm, trying to be of service at all times. The dutiful servant carries out his task, but in a dull, lifeless way.

We can all relate. A servant prays three times a day, but merely recites the words, not thinking much about their meaning. A servant buys an etrog and builds his sukkah, but doesn't spend much time or money to make them beautiful. A servant studies Torah or learns Gemara but makes no special effort to remember the learning and put it into practice.

A son is different. A son fulfills Hashem's will with joy and goes beyond the letter of the law. A son does everything he can to improve the prospects of the "family business," because he is a part of it and it is a part of him. Our teshuva of Yom Kippur is a time for action and contemplation about our personal approach and behavior.

Chart a new course of action for yourself. Say to yourself: What concrete actions can I take to change from being the person I've been to the person I wish to become? Do those things you always said you wanted to do. **Be that person you said you always wanted to be.**

## Yom Kippur and Gratitude

The atonement that accompanies Yom Kippur should provide us with a sense of gratitude. We read in the Yom Kippur liturgy that the Kohen Gadol would make a “yom tov” upon exiting the Holy of Holies unharmed. The Rama writes:

ואוכלים ושמחים במוצאי יום הכיפורים דהוי קצת יום טוב.

*We eat and rejoice the night after Yom Kippur because it is a partial holiday.*

**Rama, Orach Chaim 624:5**

Yom Kippur is a time to give thanks to G-d for our lives, our families, our friends and our community. But we must also remember to express our heartfelt gratitude for the miracle of the State of Israel. We might imagine the members of the Palmach and how they sweated on malaria-infested farms to revive the neglected and barren land; Menachem Begin strategizing in the secret headquarters

of the Irgun; or Zev Jabotinsky collaborating with the British to free Palestine from Turkish rule.

Think about the soldier who reported that in 1967, when he was rushing through Jerusalem’s Old City gates:

*I felt the presence of my papa — Herschel-Zvi of Jerusalem on one shoulder. And I felt my grandfather Moses and my zeide Yisrael (who were slaughtered in Punar) on my other shoulder. They were right with me. Encouraging me. Giving me strength. I felt as though I were a messenger of generations of Jews who sent me and my brigade to liberate the city they yearned for 2,000 years. When we reached the Western Wall someone near me made the “She’hechyanu” blessing. But I could not answer “Amen.” I just put my hand on the stones as the tears flowed from my eyes. They were part water and part prayers. They were tunes and the longing of generations of Mourners of Zion.*

How we must give thanks for the gift of Medinat Yisrael. The homeland of the Jewish People. Finally, after 2,000 years!

How we must give an extra *klap* during the Al Cheits for not dedicating ourselves enough to the Land that they so toiled to hand to us. Have we given enough thought as to why we haven’t returned to our homeland?

The Jewish people are called “*Am Yisrael*,” the nation of Israel. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik used to say that the word *am* is the same spelling as the word *im*, which means with. In order to really develop into “*Am Yisrael*,” we must be *im* Yisrael, “with” the Jewish people.

May our prayers be heard on this Yom Kippur. May our teshuva be sincere and may we and our families merit to be sealed for a year of health, happiness and blessing.

