

Jevin Eagle  
2024 High Holidays Sermon  
**5785**

Some of my most happy memories are being in my grandparents' home on Rosh Hashanah. Everyone dressed up. Dining room with the nicest dishes, silver, crystal and white table cloth. Chopped liver. Matzoh ball soup. Brisket. Pickles. Honey and nut cake. Marzipan cookies. I can smell and taste it now. Everyone is there. Parents, Brother, Grandparents, Great grandparents, Cousins, Aunts and uncles. From generation to generation.

In Grandma Bibi and Grandpa Jack's home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, looking down on us, literally, in a massive oil painting portrait, was a handsome man with a great smile, wearing a WWII army uniform. My Grandma Bibi's youngest brother of 7 siblings, Uncle Henry. As far as I know, the only person in the history of my family to fight in a battle.

No one in the family had more promise than Uncle Henry. He was an outstanding student at Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn and a star quarterback for 3 years at NYU. When WWII broke out, Uncle Henry was drafted. He served domestically, made the rank of Lieutenant, and was on leave at the time of the D-day invasion—so didn't have to go. But instead of taking his leave, Uncle Henry rushed to the boats and joined his platoon in the journey across the Atlantic Ocean, part of the largest seaborne invasion in history. Uncle Henry and his platoon arrived in Normandy in July, 1944. He and all of his men were killed in action on August 25, 1944. Uncle Henry made the "ultimate sacrifice, what Abraham Lincoln called "The last full measure of devotion"—giving your life for your country. Uncle Henry's generation was called "The Greatest Generation" because so many sacrificed their lives. 16 million Americans served in WWII. 290,000 were killed in action.

I've always wished I could speak to Uncle Henry and ask about his devotion. So I want to ask you, what is your devotion? What is so important in your life that you are willing to sacrifice for it?

In Israel, there was also a "Greatest Generation," the ones who fought and won Israel's War of Independence in 1948—just 4 years after the D-day invasion. They established the first Jewish state in 2,000 years. 6,500 died. 1% of the Jewish population of 600,000. This would be like 3 million Americans dying in WWII, 10x the number of Americans who died.

A year ago, on October 7, 2023, more Jews were killed than any day since the Holocaust. No one knew how Israel would respond, especially Israel's young people. After all, so many young Israeli's had been protesting over the past year against the Government and its proposed "Judicial reforms." Several hundred thousand protesting every week. In a country of only 9 million. This would be like 10 million Americans protesting every week. Many Israelis were so upset at the Government that they were refusing to serve their reserve duty, even pilots and special forces soldiers. The young generation couldn't have been more angry with its government and the direction its country was headed in.

Even before this, many were speaking for years about the generational divide in Israel. How the younger generation was focused on traveling, starting a high tech company, having a nice home, and partying in Tel Aviv. Yet after October 7, amidst all of the failure and disaster was a seeming miracle of the generations.

Israel called up 360,000 reservists to join the fight against Hamas, one of the largest mobilizations in its history, 4% of Israel's population. 300,000 showed up for duty within 48 hours. Faster than any country in history. Wherever they were in the world, young Israeli's stopped what they were doing, made it back to Israel. Thousands and thousands of Israelis buying themselves plane tickets, hundreds of extra El Al flights added, numerous Hercules Transport planes chartered, upending the life they had, rushing to war. Every tourist and businessperson cancelled their planned trips to Israel yet every seat was sold out on El Al...

A story is told of a village in India where young Israelis were traveling after their years of full-time war service was over. Hanging out with the Israeli's, hiking and drinking, were numerous young Russians and Ukrainians. When news came of what happened on October 7, the young Russians and Ukrainians were incredulous that ALL of the Israeli's rushed to leave the village and make their way home. This was something NONE of the Russians or Ukrainians there had even considered.

An Israeli mother tells us about visiting her son, "On October 13th, my husband and I drove down to visit my son on his base in Southern Israel...Along the roads, thousands of cars were parked on the hard shoulders on both sides of the road. With no space left in base car parks, the reservists parked wherever they could and the lines of cars went on for miles and miles...."

And then there are endless stories of brave young Israelis who gave their lives for their country. I want to share three...

Hersh Goldberg's best friend, Aner Shapira was there at the Nova concert with him. Hersh and Aner tried to escape and together with 20 people huddled in a shelter. Taking the reins, Aner immediately announced, "Hi everyone. I am Aner Shapira, I serve in the Orev unit of the Nahal Bridge. My friends from the army are coming soon. I am going to take care for things here, so don't worry." Realizing that terrorists would choose to throw grenades into that dangerously small and enclosed space, Aner told everyone: "I'll catch the grenades and throw them back—and if I miss any, you throw them back." When the terrorists arrived and began to throw in grenades, he succeeded in catching and lobbing back a number of them. Unfortunately he was then injured badly and died. Aner's friend Hersh had his arm blown off, but resourcefully managed to tie himself in a tourniquet using his T-shirt. He was taken into captivity. We know what happened to Hersh.

As an officer in the Artillery, Eden Nimri's job was to provide reconnaissance for elite commandos by setting up small drones to observe the enemy. She was with her traveling squad of four staying that night at the Nahal Oz base. Also in the bomb shelter were around 30 other female soldiers. A message came in on Nimri's communication device: "Infiltration! Infiltration! Infiltration!" Nimri gestured to her soldiers to load and cock their guns and aim them at the rear entrance of the bomb shelter. The other 30 soldiers, unarmed, crouched against a wall in terrified silence. Minutes later, a Hamas terrorist burst into the shelter. Nimri and her soldiers fired at him, killing him instantly. Then, three hand grenades were thrown into the shelter. Explosions, smoke, chaos. Nimri's soldiers, along with six of the others, dashed out through the back of the shelter while Nimri stayed behind and single-handedly battled the terrorists who stormed through the front. Nimri, who had never been in a combat situation before, died fighting. Nearly all the other women on the base, including those who remained in the bomb shelter with her, were either killed or kidnapped. All except for the 10 who snuck out while Nimri fired at the terrorists.

Benjamin Siegel of Westchester County, New York writes: "Like me, Yannai Kaminka was American and Israeli. He was also my Israel Scouts leader. In Israel, the Scouts, known as Tzofim, is our *everything*. There's no real comparison in the United States. Yannai became an officer of basic trainees. When the Hamas terrorists invaded from Gaza, his trainees were still too new to press into action, so more senior officers went out to confront the attackers. One of Yannai's squad commanders was hit in the head and injured. Yannai evacuated her under fire and took her position. He and other IDF soldiers fought off Hamas for two hours, saving an untold number of lives, before they were hit by a rocket-propelled

grenade and killed instantly. Yannai was 20. I stare at a photo Yannai's mom sent us of him and four other soldiers... smiling. Also in the photo is a young woman, the one he evacuated under fire. She came to his funeral bandaged. Another is in the hospital with serious injuries. The other two in the photo spoke at his funeral. Even Yannai had his rough days. Once, his dad wrote him a poem to brighten his mood. The last line was, "Only at night do you see the stars." It became Yannai's personal slogan. He and his soldiers painted it on the wall of his army unit's headquarters."

A front page article in an Israeli magazine....

"So much discussion in Israel about the generations. This is the young generation that some of us looked at with ridicule or worry, and we wondered—what does that generation have in common with us? In recent months, that generation has reminded us that as is the case in any chain, it is also tied to us. But no less than that, it also proved that we are dependent on it. After the death and the attacks, this is the generation that revived Israel's spirit, that reminded us what real power is. In the midst of the darkness that followed the horrors, this generation shined light..."

In a recent Wall Street Journal poll, 23% of young Americans say patriotism is important to them, 38% of all adults, down from 70% in 1998. In contrast, 86% of Israeli Jews feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish state. In the 2024 World Happiness Report, ranking countries by how happy its people say they are, the United States is ranked 23rd. Israel is ranked 5th in the World. In Israel, there are many, many problems—both external and internal. But the Israeli people are patriotic and happy.

On Shabbat this past week, and on Yom Kippur morning in our Reform Service, we read from *Parshat Nitzavim*, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—so you and your offspring will live—" It doesn't just say "live." It says "choose." So that you can live.

We read on Rosh Hashanah about the *Akeidah* where Abraham is so devoted to God that he goes to sacrifice his own son for God. God emphatically says no. The Rabbis teach that God was so impressed by Abraham's faith, that God will pardon Abraham's descendants, us, on the basis of Abraham's great merit. Just as Isaac was remembered for life, so too too we ask God: "remember us for life."

What is so important in your life, that you are willing to sacrifice for it?

On this High Holiday season,

May you be happy,  
patriotic to America and to Israel,  
Devoted to something important and dear to you.  
May you see the stars at night,  
And may God bestow upon you and your families the merit of our generations,  
from our father Abraham to Uncle Henry, Aner, Eden, and Yannai.  
And may you choose life.

לשנה טובה תכתבו ותחתמו

For a good year.

May you be inscribed and sealed in the book of life.