

Yom Kippur 5770
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Dedicated to the memory of Alex Singer and Hannah Senesh.
Dedicated to Gilad Shalit with blessings and hopes that there is still even just a burning ember of possibility that he will be released alive and celebrate the year 5770 in freedom.

(Ashrei HaGafrur/Blessed is the Match – Hannah Senesh)

“Blessed is the flame that burns in the heart's secret places.
Blessed is the heart that knows, for honors sake, to stop its beating.
Blessed is the match, consumed in kindling flame.”

Imagine having so little hope that the only blessing you can muster is a blessing for the short-lived flame you find at the end of the match.

Such was the case for a young woman named Hannah Senesh whose destiny was met soon after she found herself jumping out of an airplane thousands of feet over Europe in the midst of World War II.

In December of 1942, the news of the Nazi atrocities in Europe reached Palestine. Jews in Palestine were fighting a war on two fronts. They supported the British army with troops to defeat the Nazis. At the same time they were in the midst of a decades-long struggle for a Jewish homeland with the British who ruled the area under the British mandate. This was the setting when, one day, a member of the Haganah, the paramilitary group during the British mandate period, visited a woman named Hannah Senesh. Hannah had moved to Palestine from her native Hungary in 1939. She, like others in their youth, had made aliyah to what would later become Israel. Hannah lived with zest and zeal in the Holy Land. Now she was being asked to train as a paratrooper in order to be dropped by parachute into war-torn Europe. Why? To stir up resistance, rescue Jews and meet the need of the British to have volunteers with local knowledge help them fight World War II. She agreed and trained vigorously until the day of their clandestine mission arrived.

Dropped out of a plane over Yugoslavia with her fellow paratroopers, Hannah and her crew walked for four days and nights until they arrived at the Hungarian border. There they got the shock of their lives. Germany had just invaded Hungary. The chronology is tragic. Days after landing, the Germans had invaded Hungary. Hannah and her crew had such a tiny window within which to work and now, on top of everything, they would be viewed as Hungarian Jews in the eyes of anyone who would capture them. All the training. All the planning. All the efforts. She had worked so hard and now this. Hannah was soon captured and once the Gestapo realized she had codes for radio transmission that in their

hands could foil the British army, they did everything they could to convince her to reveal the radio codes. Torture, interrogation and even bringing her mother, still living in Hungary, to jail could not convince Hannah to give up the codes. Months later, still not giving up those radio codes, she was executed in November of 1944, even as the fascists were fleeing the beginning of the end of World War II. This audacious, incredible, brave woman had fought World War II for a mere four days before being caught. Hannah Senesh's mission was an utter failure.

Or was it? In the documentary about Hannah Senesh entitled Blessed is the Match, British Historian Martin Gilbert reflects... "It is difficult when talking about any wartime mission to talk about success and failure. It clearly failed in that Hannah Senesh and her people were captured. But in the wider sense of course it succeeded. It succeeded because it took place. Hundreds of millions of Europeans were captive people and here was this little group of Palestinian Jews who said, "We are going to try to do something." (Documentary Blessed is the Match, Roberta Grossman, Director)

And here we sit at the dawn of the year 5770 at a time when we are asked to contemplate the year that has passed - its failures, personally, nationally, communally, that weigh heavy in our hearts. An economy whose failure brought with it innumerable pains and losses – material and metaphorical. A nation that is divided and unsure of the future regardless of political affiliation. And our personal failures – in our relationships – with parents, with children, with partners, with colleagues, that the High Holidays push us to contemplate and offer apology annually. But if history is so kind to Hannah Senesh and willing to reexamine her failure and call it a success, perhaps in our taking stock of the year that has past, we can be so kind to ourselves too. The decision that lies in our hands is what we do with those failures. Do we let them destroy us? Or is there a way to incorporate those failures into a new path – away from failure – towards success, hope and growth.

In the days before she was caught, Hannah Senesh declared, "There is no turning back for me. If I die it won't have been in vain. Perhaps the Jews will hear a rumor that someone from Palestine tried to reach them and they will say they have to hang on – [thinking] maybe rescue is near." She handed the words of that poem Blessed is the Match to a fellow paratrooper. In the dying embers created by the strike of a match she still summoned hope.

Hannah Senesh – her mission, her risk, her failure, her impact, her body's ultimate return in death to Israel to be buried on Har Herzl, her legacy – all these elements of her story - they were important events in the story of a heroine of our people. But the greater impact of Hannah's mission and the attitude towards its unfortunate end far outlasted the Nazis.

Hannah's story, like those of others, inspired core attitudes in the Jewish State founded four years after her death. She, in a way, contributed to the foundation of the Israeli military once the state was declared in 1948. The hope that Hannah died trying to give was not wasted in vain. Failure would not mean an end and success would not mean the end of learning. David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, epitomized this attitude from the land's first war. This has continued again and again and again ... No matter what type of wars Israel has fought – victorious, well-handled and ably executed or difficult failures – commissions are set up to examine what has taken place. This taking stock is invaluable. It has contributed to the very success that the country is. No one rests on laurels. No one is immune from criticism. No one's voice is ignored. No failure goes unexamined. No success goes unexamined. (Start-Up Nation, Dan Senor and Saul Singer, Twelve Books, 2009, p. 95) (<http://www.amazon.com/Start-up-Nation-Israels-Economic-Miracle/dp/044654146X>)

These responses, like fine nutrients in the soil, have seeped into the Israeli culture for good, far beyond the scope of the military to the society-at-large. This grappling with failures and analyzing successes echo Ben-Gurion's goal for the Jewish State that he articulated in the earliest, incredibly difficult years. He said, "We have to undertake difficult work – to uproot from the hearts of men who are close to the matter the belief that they have something. In fact, they have nothing. They have good will, they have hidden capacities, they have to know: to make a shoe, one has to study cobbling." (Senor and Singer, p. 36)

The High Holidays urge us to understand that something is to be learned from whatever has transpired – success or failure though it may be. We have seen challenges, some of our own doing and some we were merely victims of. We have seen failures of communication that have led to damaged relationships. We have seen small misunderstandings turn into great regrets. We have challenges to our physical bodies and our ephemeral souls. But today is a gift. Like the gift of reflection that Ben-Gurion gave the Jewish army so their dangerous missions would not be in vain, the nature of the High Holidays is a gift so these days will not be in vain. A gift to evaluate, reflect and reexamine. To take those very things which have defeated us and use them to go on in strength. To take our failures which have beaten our souls to drive us forward. To take what has ravaged us and let it lead us to embrace life.

To understand this more fully, look at Israel. Not the post-Holocaust war-torn infant nation of the 1940's but the Israel of today.

According to CNN, in 2008 Israel's economy grew more than five percent --

faster than the U.S., Europe, UK and Japan. Particularly in fields of hi-tech, pharmaceutical industries, and chemicals companies.
(<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/BUSINESS/01/10/israel.economy/>)

Why?

On the surface there are these reasons: Israel, with a culture of informality means that even the most junior of employees feel free to give their opinions and insights. This way of operating learned in the Israeli military, means the potential for ideas comes from a vast pool of people, none intimidated to speak up. This lack of informality goes so far as to the nicknames of the politicians like Bibi and Arik, that measure of informality that Israel's leaders are addressed with. This informality translates to a comfort level in contributing ideas and thoughts. (Senor and Singer, p. 31) Furthermore, Israel has absorbed immigrants by the thousands understanding, unlike many other countries in the world, that these immigrants bring with them not just the potential for greater numbers but great brilliance. (p. 132)

But on a deeper level, there has been success BECAUSE of the horrific things Israel has experienced. Do not forget, this is a nation where every family sends its children to the army, and the wars and enemies and dangers that are tied up with that reality. And this is a nation where gasmasks have been issued to every citizen at times when civilians were targets. And this is a nation where alongside lessons of grammar and mathematics and science in school are literature classes filled with the poetry of parents who have lost their children defending the state. And this is a nation where suicide bombers have made the simple act of stepping on a bus a dangerous one. And this is a nation where every single citizen – military or civilian – is on the watch for terrorists, suspicious objects and bad guys, not just for their own protection, but for the sake of every citizen. Not in spite of these failures, difficulties, challenges and heartbreaks. But BECAUSE OF THEM.

All these ideas are played out in a book coming out this fall entitled START UP NATION. Its authors Saul Singer and Dan Senor, who will be guests at Temple Beth El in November, synthesize these difficult realities in order to understand the very reasons why Israel is the economic success she is.

Israel is the location of the first company Warren Buffett bought outside the United States. (p 147). Some of the technology of your iphone and your kindle was developed in Israel. So successful is Israel that when you do a Google search and a list of suggested topics come up with each letter you type, it is Israeli technology that developed that Google function. (p. 145-146) And when you make a purchase online, it is safer because an Israeli, whose job was hunting terrorists online when he was in the army, applied his skills to the world of online commerce. "In combating terrorists [the Israeli] had learned that the world was divided between good people and bad people and the trick to beating

fraud is to distinguish between them on the web. “(p 24) As entrepreneur Eli Barkat said, “You’ve got to understand the Israeli mentality. When you’ve been developing technology to find terrorists – when lots of innocent lives lie in the balance – then finding thieves is pretty simple.” (p. 29)

And the future of the company Intel was powerfully influenced by their Israeli branch. Singer and Senor write that “Israel is responsible for designing the [first Pentium] chips...in the first IBM personal computers...[saving] Intel from a downward spiral in the 1990’s. When in the 1990’s? January 1991 to be exact.

You know the date because it was the time of the first Gulf War and Israelis were being issued gas masks at the very same that this microchip was being brought into production. The Israeli in charge of Intel in Israel saw this most difficult of moments as the potential to make or break all future investments in Israel if the company could not produce the goods it needed to in the time it had been given, no matter what. He imagined future conversations in boardrooms hinging on this moment. Prospective investors pondering whether to invest in Israel based on this moment and if they could deliver in the middle of war. His challenge, he felt, would be held up as the example of how the Israelis, in spite of missiles falling down on them, delivered. And Intel is Israel “never missed a beat. (pp 153 – 158)

In the boiler room that is Israel – In the reality of the modern day Jewish state that is both pressure cooker and paradise, dealing with earthly realities and spiritual intentions – out of this nation’s sufferings and pains has emerged a brashness that only in the year 2009 can we fully come to understand.

When Israel battles terrorists and the world is against her, the frustrations and difficulty do not end, they make her make stronger. What could have destroyed a nation – instead makes her who she is. According to Singer and Senor, “Israeli attitude and informality flows also from a cultural tolerance of what Israelis call ‘constructive failures’ or ‘intelligent failures’...In the Israel military there is a tendency to treat all performance – both successful and unsuccessful – in training and simulations, and sometimes even in battle, as value- neutral. So as long as the risk was taken intelligently, and not recklessly, there is something to be learned.” (p 31) The nature of Israeli society so reflects what we are asked to do at the High Holidays – To acknowledge what has gone wrong – debrief, deconstruct and disagree. If we are willing...

You could look at the Israelis’ reality – of having to deal with death of its youth on a regular basis as a failure but instead it makes the country fight harder to insure the next young person will not have to die.

You could look at the reality of the Holocaust on the growth of our people as only a destructive force, but instead it makes us realize we have absolutely nothing to lose when we take risks.

You could look at the difficulty Israelis encounter in sending their children into the military at such a tender age but instead it makes these Israeli youth

emboldened, empowered and not easily intimidated.

And the most unpredictable, painful and deadly of Israel's realities – terrorism – makes her tougher, stronger, and able to rise above the criticism of the world to take the safety of its citizens as its highest priority – a sentiment that pays out tenfold when its citizens succeed.

Like the Israelis, we here too are taking stock of the year that is passed as the High Holidays lead us to do. Years of success. Years of failure. Our personal failures, our historical failures.

If we take this time as a holy moment for Divine contemplation, then perhaps our failures will not be in vain. There is no people who better knows failure than our people. We have had a tortured history that informs our religion. But we hold those failures as close to our hearts as our successes. And if the failures and the difficulties and the challenges that our people have endured, struggled through, been beaten by and sometimes overcome – ancient or modern that they are – can provide models for us to survive the personal failures and difficulties and challenges it will mean that the religion that we observe is not only relevant when we are in the walls of the sanctuary but that it is relevant in *whatever we encounter*. It gives us capacity to rejoice when there is good and a fountain of strength to draw from when there is not. And G-d willing, we will ultimately take strength from this day not to define ourselves by our memories of suffering but by the spiritual power of our daily lives. Kehn Yehi L'Ratson – May this be G-d's will.