

A Mission to Witness: Rabbanut Yisraelit

Day 45 of Operation Iron Swords

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A Nation of New Life

Tamar Elad-Appelbaum

*Perhaps I too will merit resurrection,
With the sounding of my shofar.
Perhaps I too will rise from the dust.*

Haim Gouri, “With the Resurrection of the Dead”

The Rabbanut Yisraelit delegation to Kfar Aza, Sedot Negev, and Mahaneh Shurah took upon itself to stand in the aftermath of the horrors of October 7th, to see just some of the terrifying sights the survivors—many of whom are our friends and community members—carry with them. They went there to hear from those currently working in the heart of the disaster, and to draw at least a little closer to our partners, siblings, children, in-laws, and friends fighting in Gaza.

I will never be able to describe what we saw, and what we saw was just a small part, just what remained of the horrifying and ongoing catastrophe which took place in many different places and many different stories. We stood in Kfar Aza, amid a long line of houses in the Kfar Aza Youth Neighborhood, and we saw how the forces of evil and desecration had destroyed everything. You could almost hear the screams and feel the fear—it was palpable. We knew that so many people had been killed and kidnapped in these very houses, and we knew that what we saw was not over. The hostages cried out to us from the earth and from the cursed tunnels in Gaza—that we keep going until they are all home safe.

We stood in Kfar Aza in “The Valley of the Slaughter” in the fields of Israel, in a young neighborhood, and I thought to myself, “Who will ever be able to come back here? How do we go back to living our lives, to believing in people and in life?” Never had I felt so close to my Holocaust survivor grandparents than in that moment in Kfar Aza. I recalled the distant look in their eyes as they spoke of how alone they had been and how the world was silent in the face of evil. Their world was silent.

I thought to myself, “What would have happened in they had been successful, and Israel, with all its residents, had been wiped out, Heaven forbid, just as they had intended? What if Israel, with all its residents, had been wiped out, and no one had remained to serve as a witness? What would the world say? Would the world feel like anything was missing?” This thought stays with me—I cannot escape it. It has killed something inside of me. Slaughter with no witnesses and with no one to scream for the murdered is an active trauma—silent and irreparable.

I stood in stunned silence in Kfar Aza, and the only thing that saved me was Hanan’s shaky, broken voice. A resident of Kfar Aza, Hanan and I met a few days after he and his fellow residents had been evacuated to Eilat. He insisted on sitting, weeping, on the floor, and singing “Lu Yehi” with his broken heart and voice, and he promised that we would live once again. I felt like he was breathing life into each and every one of us—broken heart to broken heart—reminding me of how and why our grandparents did similarly. They who saw and experienced true evil refused to submit to the destruction of their humanity, to being made nothing more than dust and ashes—so they cried, and they sang. From the dust, they sprouted once again, because there were witnesses, and human beings protecting their divine conscience and humanity. After each pogrom they rose from the dust with their broken voices and testified to the sanctity of life. We are an ancient, broken, and strong witness-delegation for anyone whose conscience is shaken, seeking to raise up the human conscience from the

dust and to resurrect the living.

In each and every generation, wicked people seek to annihilate the sanctity of life. In each and every generation, wicked people seek to turn people into numbers. They want to silence and anaesthetize the human conscience, reducing it to a chaotic abyss dominated by fear of the wicked. Meanwhile, the world calls us a ghost, something undead. But the truth is that we see now how the world is nothing more than the ghost of human conscience, and how it is our job to resurrect the living, to resurrect the conscience of humanity. We must resurrect the uncompromising struggle against evil and its allies. We must resurrect human dignity and the sanctity of life. We must resurrect love of the Jewish people, and we must resurrect the shared human project of eliminating evil and shining the light of good in the world. We must resurrect the great ideas and mutual responsibility of a people and a humanity to choose life. We must resurrect the small acts which can overcome any darkness, just like Hanan from Kfar Aza, who chose life.

And there are those who care for the dead: tens of men and women from the IDF Rabbinate in Mahaneh Shurah, alongside the police and ZAKA on the civilian side, who gathered the remains of human beings and restored to each individual their dignity, to each number, their name and story. I couldn't believe the generosity of those who shared their stories with us, who took care of us, making sure the stories wouldn't be too harsh for us, that we wouldn't leave harmed by the experienced. How do they still have the strength for this level of sensitivity and humanity?

Above all, I was struck by their care and concern for the families of the fallen. Toward the end of the day, Rabbi Menachem told us how after each long, arduous process of identification, he would accompany the families and make sure they had time to say goodbye to their loved one before the burial. I remembered quite clearly how Rabbi Menachem accompanied

my family when we said goodbye to my brother, giving us time to sing Nadav's favorite songs for him, enveloping him in love and saying our final goodbye in a manner that brought back a little of what was lost, in a small moment of compassion, holiness, and song. "The line" ("shurah") is an ancient Jewish custom of arraying a human line who support the mourning family in leaving the cemetery and accompany them back into life. I thought, how awesome is this place (Genesis 28:17), the land of Israel and the whole of Israeli society. This is nothing other than the gates of Heaven. In Kfar Aza I saw the heavens fall, and in Mahaneh Shurah I saw the people lifting them back up again—spreading over us blue skies of humanity, life, and holiness.

To you, men and women of Kfar Aza and all the other towns; to you, the men and women identifying bodies; to you, all of the People of Israel,

I fall to my knees and ask and pray that we live. You are a delegation of witnesses. From the dust, the abandonment, the pain, the reservoirs of spirit and love, rise before our eyes the very people with whom I want to live. To live, with Hanan's broken voice. To live, with Rabbi Menachem. To live, with sensitivity and interconnectedness, in a gentle but powerful human solidarity that stands against evil. To live, in order to grow the land and the world anew. To live, in order to restore the human conscience. To live, to spread light and breath new life together into the fields of light.

May we too merit to resurrection of the dead.

And perhaps, just maybe, to resurrection of the living.

★ Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum is one of the heads of the Beit Midrash for Rabbanut Yisraelit.

The Weighty Silence

Orit Raz

For a month and a half, we have been working constantly with the communities and evacuees of the Gaza envelope. We stand in a circle, holding hands in song, healing, and prayer. We are together and we create space. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to participate in a novel sort of delegation, a witnessing delegation. Instead of meeting with the living, with the survivors, with those healing, we met with the dead. We visited three different locations and each one shook us to our very cores with fright. These were places of death, objects, absence, and destruction. The weighty silence serves as testimony to everything which cannot be absorbed or imagined.

The First Location: Kfar Aza

A painful encounter with terrifying destruction. The invasion, the cruel terror, the burned homes and destroyed property, and the story of Avigayil—one daughter among many, many children who fought for their lives on October 7th. Her parents were murdered before her eyes, but she managed to escape the terrorists and reach her neighbors' safe room. Their father went out to get a gun from the emergency armory, and when he returned, he found that Avigayil and his entire family had been kidnapped to Gaza. Orphaned Avigayil, three years old.

The Second Location: The Sedot Negev Regional Council

A cemetery for the cars of Nova festivalgoers. Each car tells a story, teaches us about the life lived by its owners, and

testifies to the merciless terror unleashed upon it, the fear etched into living flesh and into steel.

The Third Location: Mahaneh Shurah

Here, at the national base for the care of fallen soldiers, workers took custody of nearly all of the bodies of those murdered on October 7th—approximately 1,144 Israeli citizens, foreigners, police officers, and soldiers. There is where most of the work of identifying and processing the bodies for burial is done.

Major Aviad Simhoni, commander of the base, shared with us some of the holy work that the IDF Rabbinate's teams do there.

A rabbi named Bentzi took us on a tour of the inner workings of the base, in the halls of the dead, and carefully explained each stage of the process of identifying the dead and readying them for burial. Every step is holy, every moment of the process done with sanctity.

The contrast screams to the high heavens—how much humanity and love these people bring to their work! Every staff member at Mahaneh Shurah works with the dead, with any and all dead, including the bodies of terrorists—and always with reverence for the dignity of the image of God and humanity.

Women take custody of and process the bodies of women, all gently and professionally, with great care and concern for the dignity of the dead.

The commander, Menachem, whose surname I cannot recall, remembers each and every soldier he has prepared for burial in the last 27 years. He led us to an inner room and shared with us, with an indescribable intensity, the almost religious atmosphere that then permeates the room. These, he said, are moments when time freezes, when the heart splits, when family members say goodbye to their loved ones before burial—moments of the holiest of holies.

All three of them—Aviad, Bentzi, and Menachem—said repeatedly that it was incomprehensible—“How awesome is this place”—but make no mistake, it’s not some sort of hell!

They repeatedly emphasized in both word and deed that “This is nothing other than the House of God,” and we could all sense along with them that this is indeed “the gates of Heaven” (Genesis 28:17). They are the ones who enable and create this sensation through the way they act.

We remained witness to the unrestrained cruelty, but also to the humanity, the intense love and human dignity which stood opposite it—love and dignity for all people as people, respect for the lives cut short, respect for their families, respect for those doing this holy work.

I lower my head in gratitude, in the name of all citizens of the world; and in our name, in deep commitment and resolve, and in true kindness.

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to the Western Negev

Gabi Barzilai

One lovely autumn morning, we, a group of students and alumni of the Beit Midrash for Rabbanut Yisraelit, traveled to see firsthand the catastrophe which was visited upon our homes on Shemini Atseret 5784. For some of us, these were the houses in which we grew up or had once lived—making our journey particularly upsetting.

Some people asked me why I was going on the trip, and I didn't have a clear answer ready for them. I went on the trip because I felt that I was able to do so, because I felt that it was important, and because I wanted to experience firsthand something of the events which so changed my land and my home.

As we were getting on the bus, Nira Nachliel (born and raised in Sa'ad) said to me, "We're going home," and I choked up with tears. I knew my home had been burned. When we got to the agricultural fields of Sa'ad, out past the highway, however, I understood that the towns would be able to return to life, and even flourish. I am an optimist; I think that they will come back to life much more quickly than many others think. Of course, not all the evacuees will be able to return, and of course, communities will need to be rebuilt, but it will happen. It is already happening.

Kfar Aza

A commander from the IDF Spokesperson's office met us in the Kfar Aza Youth Housing Project (the neighborhood for members of the younger

generation) and related to us what had happened there. He emphasized that this was just one of the twenty-two towns that had been attacked during that horrifying pogrom.

Together with understanding the scale of the violence had been, I felt it was important to focus on individual stories, to become familiar with individual hostages, with one neighborhood that had been wiped out. Fourteen hundred dead and two-hundred and forty kidnapped was just too much to comprehend.

The IDF spokesperson said that he thought they should leave this neighborhood destroyed as a form of memorial. “Like Auschwitz,” he said. His words and tone conveyed the feelings of a wide swath of the Israeli public—but I, personally, disagree entirely. October 7th was a terrible, blighted day, but it was not the Holocaust. The army took forever, but they did eventually arrive. The local emergency militia paid a dear price in their courageous battle to defend their home, but they were not led like lambs to the slaughter. Thousands of men and women felt helpless, but as a state and society we had things we could do, and ultimately, we did them. In contrast to the Holocaust, the perpetrators didn’t get away with it, not even for a single day. We made them pay an unequivocally high price.

The Car Cemetery: The Sedot Negev Region’s Improvised Memorial

This is where they brought all the cars abandoned on the sides of roads or at the Nova music festival in Re’im. Many of the cars were completely destroyed and burned out. Others were pocked with bullet holes—sometimes only two or three in a front windshield. The thin line between life and death was suddenly painfully tangible. Looking left instead of

right, hitting the gas or the brakes just a little too hard—these made all the difference.

Car licenses sitting on driver’s seats with the names of people—were they alive? Dead? Kidnapped? Baby wipes and a pacifier in an open glove compartment, playing cards, a phone charger, a neck warmer, a funny bumper sticker—the signs of a life cut short.

“The Beauty of Israel, Fallen on Your Heights”

After the dedication and a recital of the Yizkor prayer at the regional memorial, we headed to Mahaneh Shurah, a place no one had heard of or known about until after that black Shabbat.

This giant military installation serves both the IDF Chief Rabbinate, more broadly, and specifically the center for identifying bodies and preparing them for burial. The structure was set up to receive hundreds of bodies at a time, but had struggled to manage the huge influx of bodies which had come in during the first few days after October 7th. This is where the bodies of the slaughtered were brought, and where they were treated with the utmost respect and compassion. This is where families came for a final moment with their loved ones, who set out from here on their final journeys.

Some people see this building as the gates of Hell, but visiting it and meeting with the people who work in it taught me that actually the reverse is true: “How awesome is this place, this is nothing other than the House of God, and this is the gates of Heaven.” (Genesis 28:17).

We were taught about their work by Bentzi, a younger rabbi who had been here since day one, learning in the crucible of firsthand experience

the steps of the process: from admittance and reception, identification, cataloguing objects, and preparation for burial to the final meeting of the families and the coffin's departure for the cemetery. We learned about the chaos of the first days of Operation Iron Swords, about the need to process the bodies of terrorists as well as victims, and about how to identify well who is on our side and who on our enemies'.

We also met Avigayil, commander of a team of women who work with the bodies of women, and an "angel" named Menachem who has been doing this holy work for more than twenty-seven years, meeting with bereaved families at the entrance to the complex, accompanying them to the room where the coffin containing their loved one lay waiting for them, and sensitively helping them say goodbye in the manner best suited for them.

A Personal Conclusion

Everything was sterile. Traces of the destruction at every turn, but everything had already been cleaned and sterilized. It was quiet.

What had I expected? Bodies, the scent of death, war? Certainly not. I don't know how I would have dealt with seeing what actually happened. I don't want to know. Not to mention, it felt so strange to be a "tourist" in the land where I was born and raised.

I really struggle with the fact that the "Youth Generation" neighborhood in Kfar Aza has become a site for death-tourism. I understand the importance of witnessing and understanding, we too were a part of the massacre, but I still can't escape the feeling that this is an invasion of privacy and a desecration of this holy place.

*Life was lost, lost - and we shall live.
And we shall live, and mock you, Death.
This is how we shall live - linking arms and strength
With the majestic splendor of immortality.*

*We shall breathe. Yes, with rage we shall breathe - and we shall live,
Even if fear shuts our mouths.
Should one still fear? Fear what, God,*

*After the losses we saw? We shall breathe. Rage. Live. And mock
Even if your heavens will fall upon us,
Life is lost. But we shall scream
The scream of our immortality.*

Abraham Chalfi

I took this poem with me when I went on the witnessing trip, and it stuck with me all day. The need to seek out new life, to seek out hope, goodness, and morality even in the depths of destruction helped me personally deal with the things we saw and the testimonies we heard. I am convinced—I believe—that we will be able to find some good amid all this evil, that we will rise from the dust stronger and more united than ever before.

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Kishinev and Kfar Aza: A Tour of the Kibbutz of Slaughter with Bialik, Thoughts on Horror, Pain, and Anger

Ruti Beidetz

Exactly one hundred years have passed since Hayyim Nahman Bialik published his famous poem, “In the City of the Slaughter.” As part of a Zionist-Jewish delegation to study the Kishinev pogrom, a sudden outbreak of popular violence against Jews, supported by the Russian authorities and resulting in the deaths of tens of Jews, hundreds more wounded, and widespread destruction. The Bialik House exhibit in Tel Aviv contains his notebooks from the trip, pages covered from edge to edge with his tiny, cramped handwriting detailing the testimonies gathered from the people of Kishinev after the pogrom. A few months later, Bialik published two poems, “In the City of Slaughter” and “On the Slaughter,” his thought-out response to what he had experienced on the journey.

Visual Testimony

I went to the South as part of a Rabbanut Yisraelit witnessing delegation, together with fifteen rabbis from the Beit Midrash for Rabbanut Yisraelit, headed by Rabbah Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, to see the destruction and gather visual testimonies. We visited the Shuvah Junction, Kfar Aza, the field of broken cars from the Nova festival, and the center for processing and identifying bodies at Mahaneh Shurah.

On our way from Jerusalem, our tour guide, Devorah Greenberg, read pieces of “In the City of the Slaughter” aloud. The poem has stuck with

me ever since, framing and interacting with everything I see and think. I experienced, felt, thought through, and processed what I saw together with Bialik.

Bialik starts the poem with a depiction of traveling to Kishinev and with the silent testimony he gathered. His words, written one-hundred and twenty years ago, describe perfectly what I saw in the southern neighborhood of Kfar Aza:

*ARISE and go now to the city of slaughter; Into its courtyard wind thy way;
There with thine own hand touch, and with the eyes of thine head,
Behold on tree, on stone, on fence, on mural clay,
The spattered blood and dried brains of the dead.
Proceed thence to the ruins, the split walls reach,
Where wider grows the hollow, and greater grows the breach;
Pass over the shattered hearth, attain the broken wall
Whose burnt and barren brick, whose charred stones reveal
The open mouths of such wounds, that no mending
Shall ever mend, nor healing ever heal.
There will thy feet in feathers sink, and stumble
On wreckage doubly wrecked, scroll heaped on manuscript, Fragments again
fragmented
Bit by bit they were amassed through arduous labor—and in a flash, everything
is destroyed.*

Eyes told of the flood of brazen, powerful evil that swept through the space that morning. A picture of the neighborhood reveals the charred stones, the open mouths of the blackened wounds of gunfire on safe room doors, wreckage and fragments, everything amassed through arduous labor in Kfar Aza and the rest of the Gaza envelope towns, destroyed in a flash.

Looking the Horrors in the Eye

On Shabbat morning, 10/7, while I was still staring dumbfounded at the television and messaging back-and-forth with my dear friend Avi Dabush, Administrative Director of Rabbis for Human Rights and student in the Rabbanut Yisraelit program, while he was trapped in his safe room with his family in Kibbutz Nirim, I heard a journalist say—presumably when he thought his microphone was off—that “these videos are truly disturbing.” My heart skipped a beat, as I realized that, beyond what I was seeing in the news, there was a dark abyss of violent horrors they were keeping concealed, to protect us from it.

In the days that have passed since then, we have been exposed to a small part of the horrors that took place, some of which were published in real time by Hamas. The immediate publishing of violent images and videos is a new and disturbingly cruel form of warfare, reminiscent of ISIS, to whom Hamas can justifiably be compared.

The message repeated by the media and public is: protect yourself, avoid watching the videos as best you can. However, the production and showing of an official Israeli compilation of the horrors suggests that there is indeed some import to seeing what happened, at the very least for leaders, spokespersons, and decision makers who, we hope, might be aided in understanding reality by seeing the evil with their own eyes.

This is how Bialik thought of his readers, as well. Generations grew up on this poem, which in some ways served as a similar “official compilation” of the pogrom. Bialik describes the horrors, creating a harsh picture of wild abuse, degradation, cruelty, fear, and terror. He depicts the terrifying sexual violence he discovered in witness testimonies, and he does not hold back in describing the intense cruelty and degradation involved.

I will not quote here from his depictions of the horrors of Kishinev. It is important to let people choose how much and in what contexts they are exposed to horrifying violence. That being said, I will note that what Bialik wrote in Kishinev all those years ago is strikingly apt for what happened in the Gaza envelope towns, sometimes fitting it so exactly that it makes your blood run cold. It turns out that this sort of mass violence, spreading like fire across a space, has a language, with rules and grammar all its own, spoken in Kishinev and in Gaza, in Darfur and in Serbia. Yet another rule: we experience our lives as safe, and we can't comprehend this sort of violence until hell suddenly flares up through the cracks in the walls of our homes.

Bialik's poem, written a few months after the pogrom, was not simply a journalistic report. As I see it, the poem is a creative work, the product of intensive emotional and ideological articulation, constructed with an eye to leading its readers through the horrors to a specific, shared mental-emotional state. I will attempt to walk this path with him.

Shame and Degradation

Bialik describes his feelings in response to the horrifying testimonies. "Thy heart will fail with pain and shame." The poem is rife with depictions of the degradation of Jews, leading to feelings of shame and embarrassment, both on the part of the writer and that of the readers. Sometimes it is so intense that it feels like victim blaming. More than the violence, Bialik describes the wretchedness of the victim, their cowardice, their humiliation. I could not decide whether or not to quote these sections here, and ultimately my heart restrained me. His words about the weakness and degradation of the Kishinev residents are offensive, particularly when I think about the people of Kfar Aza, Be'eri, Sderot, and Ofakim.

Decades after Zionism remade us into “the new Jew,” Israelis feel very different about Jews’s basic human dignity than did Bialik and his contemporaries. Bialik was angry with a helpless community, abandoned and alone, praying to God to save them. In contrast, the Gaza envelope towns, perhaps the Kibbutzes most of all, are part of the Zionist story of activism and agency. This story speaks of both individuals and communities who are heroic and kind, who work hard, and who are spiritually and culturally creative. As participants in this story, we tend to prefer stories of heroism, solidarity, and responsibility. We have a much harder time adopting Bialik’s penetrating perspective and gazing into the depths of our degradation.

The slaughter of October 7th reminded us all of the persecuted Jews, the debased victims among our ancestors. We look at them, and we see both the ways in which we are similar and the ways in which we are different. We must not forego the ability to see the people of the Gaza envelope as strong, free people who stood up to evil. There was a vulnerable moment, but it was just a moment, and it is not degrading. Evil people can rape, kill, or kidnap a person, but it does not take one iota away from their dignity or the image of God in them.

Indeed, we too feel a deep sense of shame, but not for ourselves as individuals so much as for our society as a whole, and for the state which did not protect us. The shame of a sovereign Jewish society differs radically from the shame of a persecuted Jewish minority, from the shame Bialik depicts in regard to those “shamed of the earth.”



Bialik's Rage

As the poem moves through its storm of pain and shame, the subject changes:

*Forgive, ye shamed of the earth, yours is a pauper-Lord!
 Poor was He during your life, and poorer still of late.
 When to my door you come to ask for your reward,
 I'll open wide: See, I am fallen from My high estate.
 I grieve for you, my children. My heart is sad for you.
 Your dead were vainly dead; and neither I nor you
 Know why you died or wherefore, for whom, nor by what laws;
 Your deaths are without reason; your lives are without cause.
 What says the Shekinah? In the clouds it hides
 In shame, in agony alone abides;*

Suddenly it is not Bialik but God who speaks in the poem. The wretchedness, which had previously been that of the pogrom's victims, now becomes that of God. In Bialik's poem, God is powerless, impoverished, and has no way to make things meaningful for God's believers. All that remains is to ask forgiveness, to be sorry, and to contemplate the Shekhinah in her shame.

God here charges Bialik with a singular mission: spread to all of the Jews the gospel of "the ethics of shame," a sort of "wake up call" which God directs to God's people.

*Or better, keep thy silence, bear witness in My name,
 To the hour of My sorrow, the moment of My shame.
 And when thou return—Go to them not emptyhanded,*

*Bring thou the blot of My disgrace upon thy people's head,
And from My suffering do not part, But set it like a stone within their heart!*

Bialik's rage takes aim as well at the beggars among the victims, who wave about their wounds in order to extract money from wealthy patrons. Here too, we can feel the difference between Bialik's Kishinev and sovereign Israel. We too are witness to the mass collection of donations, but we experience it not as begging but as proud solidarity.

The targets of Bialik's rage are surprising. Where is his anger at the perpetrators? At the Russian government? Bialik seems to have preferred to focus on the sort of helpless anger—with which we are so familiar at this very moment—which could serve as a tool for creating. He didn't want it to go away. On the contrary—he gives his heart over fully to this anger.

*What is thy business here, O son of man?
Rise, to the desert flee!
The cup of affliction thither bear with thee!
Tear thou thy soul, rend it in many a shred!
With impotent rage, thy heart deform!
Thy tear upon the barren boulders shed!
And send thy bitter cry — into the storm!*

Bialik wants to extract great tears and bitter cries from the depths of anger and rage, ending his poem with a cry that could shake the foundations of the earth.

generation of heroes fighting for redemption. He called them to ascend the mountain, initiating the heroic generation of the Second Aliyah, which began in 1905.

Where Will Rage Take Us?

Anger is a powerful force, both destructive and creative. It is one of the strongest and most determinative forces in our society today, perhaps even the strongest. Hamas' actions on that cursed day were acts of rage as well. Rage annihilates and destroys both the victim and the aggressor—pulling us all into a cruel and unceasing cycle of destruction.

What will we do with our rage? Will we simply take our starting assumptions to be correct and rage at those we already considered guilty anyway—be they Hamas, the Arabs, the world, the Israeli Supreme Court, the Left, the heads of the security establishment, the Prime Minister, or God?

I won't maintain any pretence of prophecy, as Bialik did, but I want to learn something from the thrust of Bialik's words: We must process our pain, our shame, and our rage, and only then will we be able to turn our rage into a roar that shakes the desert. We must rehabilitate our generation of heroes, not merely in order to "flatten" the other side, but in order to rebuild two societies oriented around human life and dignity.

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And Jacob Was Afraid, and He Said, “How Awesome Is This Place, for This Is Nothing Other than the House of God, and This Is the Gates of Heaven

Iris Bondi

I am coming back from a disturbing trip to the Gaza envelope, a select witnessing delegation sent by Rabbanut Yisraelit. We went to Kfar Aza, Sedot Negev, and Mahaneh Shurah. I know that I now must bear witness, but I still don't have the words.

Today, the Friday of Shabbat Vayetse, I want to tell you about one moment in Mahaneh Shurah, a place that shakes me to my core with holy terror. The sort of place one could call “terrifying and awesome,” perhaps what the poet had in mind in the liturgical poem “Powerful, Terrifying, and Awesome, when I am in distress, I call to You.”

As we listened as best we could to stories that neither heart nor ear can contain, the Patriarch Jacob stood before us in the figure of Rabbi Bentzi, “a person with the divine spirit,” (Genesis 41:38). his hands and his feet and every inch of his body praying. He stood before us shaken, and comforted us, whispering with compassion:

“Make no mistake. This is not Hell. This is nothing other than the House of God, and these are the gates of Heaven.”

Those words still echo with me, as if the whole day were shrouded in a gentle, transparent, insistent tallit of burning faith, and of supplication—and perhaps most of all, of love.

On such a tense day, when we were expecting 13 hostages to be released,

and hoping for the Kingdom of God to manifest upon us in the 13 Attributes of Mercy, these words seem to me to be key—and prayer, and commandment.

“This is not Hell. This is nothing other than the House of God, and these are the gates of Heaven.”

May they return in peace—whole in body and soul, and may they and their families know true healing.

May our eyes see Your return to Zion

Quickly

And with mercy.

(Sometimes the Shekhinah too is held captive, and needs us to pray for her redemption, and her rapid return.)

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Pictured: Kfar Aza, a broken door full of bullets, fallen on the floor, where it has sat and shaken these 48 unbearable days.





Poem by Abraham Chalfi translated by Heather Silverman,
Michael Bohnen, Rachel Korazim.

Portions of “In the City of Slaughter” taken primarily from
H.N. Bialik, “The City of Slaughter” in Complete Poetic
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