

## **“Diagnostic Momentum: The Wisdom of an Open Mind”**

First Day Rosh Hashanah 5784/2023

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Jake Tapper is well-known to many of us as the lead Washington news anchor for CNN... and host of “The Lead – With Jake Tapper.” [You know: “I’m Jake Tapper, and THIS..... is CNN.”]

Tapper is an alumnus of the Conservative Movement’s Camp Ramah in the Poconos and a graduate of Akiba Hebrew Academy – a Jewish day school in Philadelphia where the current governor of Pennsylvania – Josh Shapiro – also received his education.

I can’t be 100% certain, but I presume (and I certainly hope) that Jake Tapper has today found his way to Rosh Hashanah services, either in Washington DC, where he lives or perhaps with family in his home-town congregation. Good Yuntiff, Good Yohr to Mr. Tapper!!

Wherever this leading news journalist finds himself on this sacred day, I cannot help but wonder how he will react to the Akeidah – today’s Torah Reading – which describes God’s inscrutable and devastating command to Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac and to sacrifice him as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. At the last moment – as we know – with the sacrificial knife already raised in Abraham’s hand, poised and ready to strike, Isaac is spared. A sacrificial ram, caught by its horns in a thicket nearby, is offered in Isaac’s stead. Today’s Torah Reading details Isaac’s close call, his near-death experience, and Abraham’s heart-wrenching dilemma.

I wonder at Jake Tapper’s reaction to this disturbing text because, earlier this year, he described his own child’s terrifying brush with death, his 15-year-old daughter Alice Tapper’s near-death experience.

Around Thanksgiving, Alice – an otherwise healthy teenager – complained of severe stomach cramps. She had a low fever, chills, and was vomiting. The Tappers – the very model of parental responsibility – took their daughter to the emergency room, where her blood pressure was found to be elevated and her white blood count worryingly high. Her abdominal pain was growing more intense.

Alice was diagnosed with a viral infection and was treated with Tylenol and a heating pad. Her condition continued to decline. Her parents’ suggestion that perhaps she was suffering from appendicitis was dismissed by the medical staff. Alice started turning a pale green. Her news anchor father’s request that she be treated with anti-biotics was rejected... because, he was told, given her putative viral infection – anti-biotics might do more harm than good.

Alice and her parents endured a grueling, painful, three-day hospital stay before it became clear that appendicitis was indeed the culprit. By that time, young Alice’s appendix had ruptured... and was releasing a steady stream of deadly toxins throughout her body. She was going into hypovolemic shock – which threatened to shut down her other organ systems.

Writing of her experience later, Alice said that she welcomed this news with a sense of relief: now, at least, the doctors had a plan and a constructive course of treatment to administer.

She also wrote this:

“Once I was well enough to leave the ICU, I stayed in the hospital for another week, bedridden with uncomfortable drains in my body and horribly sharp cramping pains, for which I was given morphine. I could barely walk. I didn’t recognize the helpless, hunchbacked, green, exhausted girl I saw in the hospital mirror.”

Appendicitis is the most common surgical emergency in children. Yet, it seems, the condition is misdiagnosed as much as 15% of the time. In part, this is because up to half of pediatric appendicitis patients do not exhibit the tell-tale symptoms of right lower quadrant pain and fever.

But a significant percentage of these potentially lethal mis-diagnoses – as in Alice Tapper’s case – are due to **DIAGNOSTIC MOMENTUM**. Dr. Prashant Mahajan, a leading professor of pediatric medicine whom the Tappers consulted, explains that **DIAGNOSTIC MOMENTUM** “occurs when medical professionals have difficulty viewing patient symptoms from an unbiased perspective – because a certain diagnosis has already been assigned to a patient.”

That is to say, a mistaken diagnosis takes on a life of its own... gains momentum... and causes even seasoned professionals and experts in the field to dismiss other possibilities... and to ignore alternative diagnoses and any change in the prescribed course of treatment. **DIAGNOSTIC MOMENTUM** represents a potentially deadly lack of an open mind. This despite the fact that a current diagnosis and course of treatment have been wildly unavailing.

I suspect that when Jake Tapper hears – in this morning’s Torah Reading – **BAYOM HASHELISHI** – that an understandably anxious Isaac appealed to his father on the third day of their journey toward the sacrificial site... he will recall his own child’s three-day-long brush with death. Under the circumstances, I wouldn’t be surprised if Isaac had turned a pale green as well!

I suspect that when Jake Tapper hears – in this morning’s Torah Reading – that an angel of God called out to Abraham at the last moment **AL TA’AS LO ME’UMAH** – “Do the child no harm” – he will be reminded of the first principle of medicine – “Do no harm” – attributed to Hippocrates in his treatise “On the Epidemics” – a principle tragically belied by **DIAGNOSTIC MOMENTUM**.

I suspect that when Jake Tapper hears in this morning’s Torah Reading of the knife in Abraham’s hand and the ram caught in the thicket so very nearby, he will remember the lines from his own daughter’s published account of her ordeal:

“The X-ray machine was just down the hall, the C.T. machine just a floor below, the sonogram machine just steps away and the antibiotics I needed were just one phone call away. But doctors didn’t utilize these tools to quickly diagnose and treat me and, as a result, I almost died.”

We can be grateful to God, as the Tappers certainly are this Rosh Hashanah, that both Isaac AND Alice were spared, if only after their cruel and scarring brushes with death.

On this Rosh Hashanah I am thinking of Jake Tapper and of his daughter – now thankfully restored to good health and full strength and a justly bright future. I am thinking of them because DIAGNOSTIC MOMENTUM is at the very essence of this sacred season. It is at the very heart of the Ten Days of Repentance which we have now begun together.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are fairly to be thought of as three harrowing and consequential days of personal introspection, moral and spiritual self-examination and self-diagnosis. We are admitted to this process with a great deal of momentum... accrued over the course of the past year or many years or over a life-time. Together on these High Holy Days, we confront the fact that some aspects of our lives as we have led them, of our by now well established patterns of conduct and habit, are less than spiritually salutary: that they are morally misguided and may in fact threaten our most cherished relationships and our very future.

Only our own DIAGNOSTIC MOMENTUM can explain the tenacity with which we continue in the same old, unproductive, insalubrious, and ultimately self-destructive direction.

These High Holy Days, these days of introspection, forgiveness, and repentance, beckon us to consider the distinct possibility that we have not been heading in the entirely right direction. This Rosh Hashana invites us to open our minds and to open our hearts to another way: a better way of living.

Today we have the precious opportunity to demonstrate an open mind and to re-think our chosen course and direction.

With an open mind, today we can cleanse ourselves of toxic resentments and of old grudges that poison our relationships.

With an open mind, today we can redress painful offenses... those we have inflicted... and those we have endured.

With an open mind, today we can lower the temperature in the personal or political conflicts that divide us... and that threaten our family and societal systems.

With an open mind, today we can truly listen to each other, truly hear each other and grow more responsive to the needs of loved ones and neighbors, community members and strangers: neither dismissing their concerns out of hand nor blithely ignoring their insights.

With an open mind, today we can honestly consider our own personal religious lives. We can envision the kind of Jews we were meant to be, the kind of Jews we would like to be, and in that light, with an open mind, today we can look in the mirror and see whether we recognize ourselves or not.

Over the course of these High Holy Days we repeatedly enumerate the many sins and transgressions... the many failures and shortcomings that beset us. Each one of us must address them – with open minds – on a case-by-case basis. But in the year that has now begun, let us all avoid the truly deadly sin of DIAGNOSTIC MOMENTUM and the insipid spiritual stagnation that results. May we have the wisdom to choose life and love, kindness and commitment in the New Year ahead... constantly aware that we just might have been wrong all along: that there just might be a better way.

Good Yuntiff, Good Yohr.

I'm Joe Prouser, and THIS..... is Rosh Hashanah.

## **“The Talmud, Dr. Dolittle, and Democracy in Peril: The Wisdom of Moderation”**

Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5784/2023

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At some point in my early childhood, I joyfully and gratefully became acquainted with the now classic 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox live action film “Dr. Dolittle” – starring Rex Harrison in the title role and featuring, among many others, Richard Attenborough as zookeeper Albert Blossom. The fictional Dr. Dolittle, of course, could – as the movie’s theme song put it – “squeak and squawk and speak and talk with the animals.” By way of example, the linguistically gifted Dr. Dolittle, the same song explains, spoke fluent “elephant and eagle, buffalo and beagle.”

One of my favorite elements of the film – in childhood and in more recent and – I hope – more thoughtful retrospect – was the “Pushmepullyou” – described as the “rarest animal of all,” a descendant of Abyssinian gazelles, Asiatic chamois, and the last of the unicorns. In the movie, the Pushmepullyou looked like a two-headed llama, one head each at opposite ends of a llama torso, facing and, therefore, instinctively and habitually trying to move in opposite directions... constantly at cross purposes... the two heads and conflicting intentions making it all but impossible for this remarkable creature to get anywhere, to go anywhere, or to make any progress whatsoever.

In contrast, it should be noted, in the original 1920 Dr. Dolittle book by Hugh Lofting, the Pushmepullyou usually only used one of its heads to talk, reserving the other for grazing – thus allowing it to eat while speaking without being rude... making the mystical creature the very model of both civility and efficiency.

The typical Dr. Dolittle fan may not be aware, but – I submit – the Pushmepullyou was anticipated by the sages of the Babylonian Talmud.

When faced with an intractable conflict between two seemingly conflicting moral principles – or two conflicting and irreconcilable demands of Jewish ritual or even marital law – the rabbis would say “HARAY ZEH CHAMAR GAMAL.” -- “This is a case of one individual acting simultaneously as a camel driver AND a donkey driver.” The rabbis explained that a camel can be led only by pulling from in front... and a donkey can be driven only by pushing from behind. One who is charged with conducting both procedures simultaneously, finds him- or her-self at cross purposes: unable to move, unable to get anywhere, unable to make any meaningful progress whatsoever. CHAMAR GAMAL – the original Pushmepullyou.

Notwithstanding my affection for Dr. Dolittle, nor my admiration for Rex Harrison, I am distressed to report that the CHAMAR GAMAL – the Pushmepullyou – is alive and kicking (I will not say “alive and well”) in 2023 as we welcome the New Year of 5784.

American society and – perhaps most alarmingly – our elected officials and governmental leaders – are, it seems, constantly beset by divisiveness, by culture wars, by a self-inflicted cycle of seemingly insoluble conflicts and irreconcilable differences. We are too often at cross purposes... unable to get anywhere, to go anywhere, or to make any meaningful progress at all.

We seem to be speaking entirely different and unfamiliar languages... simply unable to communicate. The two-party system which has sustained the nation has broken down and become increasingly toxic and dysfunctional. CHAMAR GAMAL: If one party PULLS in a given direction... the opposition will PUSH in the opposite direction... at times, to be sure, out of principle... but OFTEN, to be SURE, out of mere instinct, spite, recalcitrance, malice and ill will. Push me, pull you.

227 years ago almost to the day, on September 17, 1796 (the tenth anniversary of the signing of the US Constitution), George Washington presciently warned the new American nation:

"However [political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion."

More recently, United States Senator Corey Booker of New Jersey put it this way:

"There is too much disagreement for disagreement's sake. In a time of persistent challenges that still call into question our most sacred aspirations as a country, we cannot afford shallow, callous divisiveness in our public debate."

Profound and serious issues face the American people... from the epidemic of gun violence... to reproductive rights to immigration to racial inequities to what aspects of personal character and individual actions qualify or properly disqualify aspirants to the nation's highest office. This is no time for the CHAMAR GAMAL approach to governance. For the sake of American democracy and for the sake of everyday Americans, the partisan Pushmepullyou to which we have become sadly inured and increasingly accustomed must not only find a way to "pull together" with civility and efficiency – but – like its model under the tutelage of Dr. Dolittle... learn to dance with at least a measure of grace.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the major political parties takes as its mascot the donkey well known to the CHAMAR GAMAL... while the other is represented by the elephant... at whose language Dr. Dolittle somehow grew so very adept. Let us pray that there is hope for our own Pushmepullyou.

It should, furthermore, be painfully clear to us all that the dysfunction and toxicity characterizing American politics and society [our failure to value the moderate... our pandering to extremism] have – alas – been exported to the State of Israel... with results at least as disconcerting and frightening as our own national travails.

As a deeply confirmed believer in democracy... I view with dismay the efforts by the ruling Israeli coalition to strip the Supreme Court of the power of judicial review over laws enacted by the legislature (the Knesset). Such grossly mislabeled "judicial reform" represents a direct threat to the Jewish State – imperiling its democratic status, jeopardizing its standing among the community of nations, and undermining its cherished claim to membership among the countries

of the free world. I am comforted and fortified by the ordinary Israeli citizens who march and protest by their thousands, week in and week out, opposing the administration's ruthless power grab, and standing up for principle on the front lines of democracy.

As a caring Jew striving to offer religious leadership to the Jewish community, I am ashamed that ostensibly traditional fellow Jews and their political allies are prominent among the forces seeking to weaken the rule of legal accountability in the Jewish State. (Thankfully, pious Jews are also well represented among the undaunted pro-democracy protesters.) As a core article of my personal faith, I believe that the millennia-old historic mission of the Jewish People includes the mandate to advocate for a society based in law and equity and accountability. That is at the very heart of our shared Covenant. For ostensibly traditional Jews to be associated with a cynical political effort to undermine our tradition's most fundamental values is a desecration. A Jew claiming the mantle of tradition and piety while simultaneously subverting the national judiciary is a tragic oxymoron, an inherent contradiction, a CHAMAR GAMAL of the first order: truly a Pushmepullyou. Let us pray that this ungainly beast may yet find a path to freedom, national compromise, moderation, accommodation, and equal justice UNDER THE LAW in the Jewish State we continue to love and support.

Otherwise, Israeli society will get nowhere, will go nowhere good, and will make no meaningful or positive progress.

As Americans and as Jews, we have our work cut out for us in the New Year. As Justice Louis Brandeis – American Zionist leader and the first Jew named to the United States Supreme Court – said over a hundred years ago: “The most important political office is that of the private citizen.”

In the New Year that has just begun, may we demand of ourselves that which we yearn to see in our leaders. Like that gifted linguist of children's fiction and film fame, may we, too, learn to “squeak and squawk and speak and talk” not only with those of the same perceived political species, but – most importantly – with those with whom we have very real differences, those who express themselves in a seemingly inscrutable idiom, be they members of our own families, neighbors in the broader community, citizens across the nation, or fellow Jews living out the dreams of countless generations in the re-established State of Israel.

As President Jimmy Carter wrote: *“The bond of our common humanity is stronger than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices.”*

God grant that he was right.

In the New Year ahead, may we and our leaders reclaim the civility and efficiency which was the original vision of our founders. May we and may our leaders truly strive to “pull together” in the New Year ahead, or we will be able to “do little” to bring about the brighter future for which we have come together on this Rosh Hashanah to pray with anxious, heartfelt fervor.

## **“The Student Becomes the Teacher: The Wisdom of Jews-by-Choice”**

Kol Nidre 5784/2023  
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Among the most fulfilling and inspiring aspects of my 35-plus years as a rabbi has been the opportunity to teach, mentor, and to welcome converts to Judaism. Individuals who have been born into other religious traditions or to no religion at all, who have seen the beauty and wisdom and personal fulfillment that is to be found in embracing Judaism and who expend extraordinary efforts to make our faith their own. It has been uplifting and fortifying for me to witness this spiritual enthusiasm, commitment, and openness to religious growth, an ardor and passion for the Tradition and religious identity that – all too often – native-born Jews take for granted.

At the culmination of the educational, spiritual, and ritual process Jews-by-Choice undergo to gain entry into the Jewish faith and People, it is customary for them to select a Hebrew name to reflect their new status. While some rabbinic authorities prefer that all men adopting Judaism be named “Avraham” – and women “Sarah” after the founders of our faith... Jews-by-Choice have taken on a wide variety of Hebrew names. Some select a name as close as possible to their given names, as if to suggest that they have – down deep – always been Jews, that it has always been part of who they are, their psyches, their emotional and spiritual make-up. This method of naming also reflects the common Jewish practice of choosing Hebrew and English names that closely correspond. Thus, among my conversion students I have had a Sonia become Shoshana... a Rebecca become Rivka... an Amanda become Emunah... and a Ron become Reuven.

However, I also explain to my aspiring conversion students that they may devise a name which gives expression to their personal religious journey and experience. A number of students who have followed this course have made illuminating choices.

For example, one accomplished new student of Judaism was drawn to our tradition by its emphasis on learning, but more specifically, by the prospect of life-long-learning, by the challenge of aspiring to an ever deeper appreciation of God’s will, Jewish observance, and Jewish sacred text. He was grateful that – in order to adopt Judaism – he was not required to be a “finished product” or expert in our faith. There is always more to learn, further perspectives to explore. He chose the name YIGDAL YAVIN – meaning “He will grow in understanding.” Yigdal Yavin went on to become a committed and active member of his Jewish community and congregation and an assiduous student of Jewish Tradition.

Another student who became a devout Jew, and who has stayed in touch with me over the years, chose the name “Matan Or” – meaning – “The Gift of Light.” That name was designed to honor the enlightenment and illumination he discovered in Judaism, which he considered a divine gift, and which guides him to this day. A member of the United States Army reserves, he attended to the final steps of the conversion process in full uniform.

A similar approach to Judaism characterized the name chosen by a young woman who became “ELIANA” – meaning, “God has answered me.” She had been raised in a faith which she found

decidedly unsatisfying and intellectually unconvincing. She had explored and investigated, all the while praying to find a suitable, meaningful, compelling, spiritual home. When she discovered Judaism, she said, ELIANA – God answered her prayers.

One of the most creative and thoughtful choices of a Hebrew name was by a man who was older than the typical conversion aspirant and who became a good personal friend. Already married and a father, he took the choice of a Hebrew name very seriously and contemplated the matter at length. Finally, he came to me very excited to announce that he had made his selection. He said that he would be YITZCHAK. I was mystified by the seemingly pedestrian choice – which was in no way related to his given name.

“It is the only name that makes sense,” he said. “I will – like all Jews-By-Choice – be called BEN AVRAHAM AVINU... ‘the son of Abraham, our Fore-Father.’ And my 7-year-old son is already named Jacob. When I complete my conversion, we will be AVRAHAM, YITZCHAK, v’YAAKOV – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I will be a link in the historic chain of Jewish continuity.”

I concluded from this conversation that the future YITZCHAK was indeed sincere in his intentions and ready to be warmly welcomed into our community. YITZCHAK went on to take on a variety of leadership positions in his congregation, ultimately serving as its president. He did his biblical namesake – and his rabbinic sponsor and his son – proud.

21 years ago or so, I served on the BET DIN – the Rabbinic Court – that oversaw the conversion of the entire Abayudaya community of Uganda, a group that had been living pious lives as Jews in rural Central-East Africa since 1919, but without benefit of formal conversion. Our Bet Din interviewed every member of the community and supervised the ritual steps required to make their de facto Jewishness official and binding.

A sign of the strength of their commitment is that they all already had Hebrew given names... mostly of biblical origin: Moshe, Esther, Emanuel, and so on. The surnames were standard AFRICAN nomenclature. In fact, they were scandalized that on our Bet Din were rabbis named Scott, Andy, and Howard. “Why are you ashamed to be identified by Jewish names?” they pointedly asked. Bearing the biblical name Joseph, I was spared their criticism and curiosity.

There were three Abayudaya with memorable Hebrew names. One young boy had been named TARFON – after a famous sage of the Talmudic Era: a sign of the community’s growing familiarity with Rabbinic Literature.

Another young boy was named RABIN OMER after the late Prime Minister of Israel: an expression of ABAYUDAYA attachment to the Land, State, and People of Israel. I recall a rabbi saying, “How lovely – ‘RABIN OMER’ – Rabin speaks.” The youngster corrected us: “No, that’s OMER spelled with an AYIN, not an ALEF. I was born during the counting of the Omer between Pesach and Shavuot.” His name was an homage to the martyred Israeli leader, but also a tribute to the rhythms of the Jewish year.

Finally, a story some of you may have heard me tell. A teenage Abayudaya girl told us her Hebrew name was “LUCKILY.” That is not a Hebrew name, of course, as we gently explained to this young woman appearing before the BET DIN. She insisted that LUCKILY is indeed Hebrew and that the name appears prominently in the Torah. The rabbis suggested the Hebrew name MAZAL, meaning “luck.” We debated with the pious teen for some time before realizing that her speech was characterized by the R-L pronunciation interchange so common in Asia and – we now understood – in parts of Africa. LUCKILY was actually RUCHELE – Rachel! “OH!!! Do you mean RACHEL?” we asked. Exasperated, she confirmed: “YES! That’s what I’ve been telling you – LUCKILY!”

One final conversion story. As a young rabbi in Connecticut, I studied for a full year with an African immigrant, a Muslim from the nation of Guinea who was planning to marry a Jewish woman from an Orthodox family in Brooklyn. English was his third language – after Susu, his native tongue, and French, which he learned in college. His English was weak and I did not speak Susu, though he taught me a few useful phrases and was always especially pleased when – years later – I greeted him accordingly.

I had studied French for many years, so we decided that his conversion instruction would be in that language which we had in common. I would later officiate at his wedding – performing the ceremony in a combination of Hebrew, English, and French.

Earlier, when it was time to finalize his conversion, I convened a BET DIN of colleagues who also spoke French... academics who, in the course of their studies, had been required to pass multiple language competency exams. During the course of the BET DIN it became apparent that this candidate was knowledgeable, sincere, and already quite observant. One rabbi noticed that my student still spoke admiringly of the Muslim faith in which he had been raised and offered no criticism of that tradition. Why would he want to leave it to adopt Judaism, the rabbi asked in French. My student explained that Judaism was older than Islam and that thus, he felt, it brought him “un peu plus proche à Dieu” – “just a little bit closer to God.” No further questions were deemed necessary and my student was enthusiastically accepted into our faith by my rabbinic colleagues. It was an easy, inspiring, and humbling decision.

Repeatedly over the course of my career, I have seen students become the teachers, as Jews-By-Choice with whom it has been my privilege to work and to study have offered invaluable lessons of wisdom and insight into our religious tradition.

Rabbi Harold Shulweiss of blessed memory famously said that – living in the modern era – in freedom – and in non-coercive religious communities... “Today all Jews are Jews-by-Choice.” WE decide if we will avail ourselves of the spiritual riches, the beauty, the wisdom, the inspiration which our tradition offers in such abundance. We are Jews – by choice. On this Yom Kippur, On this Kol Nidre Eve, we once again are invited to choose the tradition that brought us here in the first place.

On this Yom Kippur, on this Kol Nidre Eve, may we rededicate ourselves to continued learning and – like YIGDAL YAVIN – to growing in understanding.

On this Yom Kippur, on this Kol Nidre Eve, may we – like MATAN OR – embrace the gift of enlightenment that is the Jewish faith.

On this Yom Kippur, on this Kol Nidre Eve, may we – like ELIANA – come to understand the extent to which God has already answered our prayers.

On this Yom Kippur, on this Kol Nidre Eve, may we – like YITZCHAK – take our rightful place in the chain of tradition and continuity that began millennia ago with Abraham Isaac and Jacob... Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. May we lovingly transmit that commitment to future generations.

On this Yom Kippur, on this Kol Nidre Eve, may we – like TARFON – discover our kinship with the Sages who shaped our tradition. Like RABIN OMER, may we understand our common cause with the Land, State, and People of Israel: on the sacred days of the Jewish year and on all the days in between.

And like that exasperated teenage RACHEL of Uganda, on this Yom Kippur, on this Kol Nidre Eve, may we clearly see how very lucky, how very fortunate, how very blessed we are to call Jewish Tradition our own: even if at times we are less than adept at articulating that gratitude.

Our students have become our teachers. They have seen what has been ours to see all along. As I shared with my student many years ago – citing Voltaire: “Le monde avec lenteur marche vers la sagesse” – “The world marches all too slowly toward wisdom.”

On this Yom Kippur, on this Kol Nidre Eve, may we all take steps – genuine and meaningful, bold and confident – that bring us “just a little bit closer” to that divine goal.

## **“Remembering Israel’s Fallen Fighter Ace: The Wisdom of our Departed”**

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5784/2023  
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At this hour of Yizkor, let us note that – just five weeks before this New Year began – the Jewish People lost a giant, and the State of Israel mourned a military hero of historic dimensions. Major General Giora Romm died at the age of 78, after his final battle: with cancer.

General Romm left behind his bereaved wife, Miriam, a daughter, two sons, and a number of proud grandchildren.

Giora Romm was an Air Force fighter pilot, the very first to be recognized by the Jewish State as an “Ace.” In the world of military aviation, an “Ace” is a pilot who has shot down five enemy aircraft in battle. Giora Romm achieved that distinction in the first three days of the 1967 Six Day War.

On the first day of the war, 22-year-old Giora shot down two MiGs over Egyptian territory... and on the same day downed a single MiG over Syria. The next day, he was wounded by anti-aircraft fire while leading a strike against Syrian positions on the Golan Heights, and was hospitalized. Briefly!! He escaped from the Israeli army hospital, returned to combat, and shot down two more MiGs on the same day.

In 1969, during the war of attrition, Romm was himself shot down over Egypt. He was badly injured as he ejected at super-sonic speeds, breaking his right leg and left elbow. He was taken as a Prisoner of War – and held in Egyptian solitary confinement – for three months. The only real outside news his captors shared with him during his time as a POW was of the Apollo XI moon-landing, a feat which, General Romm freely admitted, he deeply coveted.

Romm was eventually released in a prisoner exchange. He returned to active duty and flew missions – again – over Egypt... during the 1973 Yom Kippur War: a war launched 50 years ago today! In an interview not long before his death, General Romm said that managing his fears, processing his memories, and bringing himself to fly back over the Egyptian border into combat – once again – was far more difficult and trying than his torturous months as a POW. As he put it, “The cure was tougher than the illness.”

In 1985, Romm took part in a raid against PLO headquarters in Tunisia.

The intrepid general went on to serve the Jewish People and the Jewish State in a variety of roles. He became an Air Force squadron leader, Air Force Base commander, Deputy Commander of the Israeli Air Force, and military attaché to the Israeli diplomatic mission to the United States.

Following his military career, Romm directed the Civil Aviation Authority... the Israeli equivalent of the FAA. He also directed the Ministry of National Infrastructure. He served as a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, and was chairman of Metzilah, the

“Center for Zionist, Jewish, Liberal and Humanist Thought.” Finally, he served as Director General of the Jewish Agency – the largest Jewish non-Profit in the world, responsible for the absorption and integration of immigrants to Israel, and addressing Israel-Diaspora relations.

General Romm earned an MBA from UCLA, and was a thoughtful reader. He offered an interpretation of the best-selling “Life of Pi” as a meditation on managing personal trauma: a topic at which he had considerable experience and success.

At one consequential point in his distinguished life, General Romm came to realize that he “would pay any price to re-meet (his) late father” and to learn about what he was like as a young man.

The opportunity, of course, had passed, but he determined that his grandchildren would have no such regrets. To that end, he wrote a memoir – a retrospective of his peak years of military service, including his Egyptian captivity. The prize-winning Hebrew original was translated into English and titled “Solitary: The Crash, Captivity, and Comeback of an Ace Fighter Pilot.” The author is careful to insist that the book is not an autobiography, as it describes only four years of his life. The most important theme of “Solitary” – according to General Romm – is that “One can rebuild and regain his previous life even after the most traumatic experience.”

At this hour of Yizkor, we do well to embrace the wisdom – to learn from the life experience of Major General Giora Romm, of blessed memory. Each of us remembering and mourning departed loved ones has endured painful loss and trauma. For some, that loss is a fierce, defining, constant presence poised to consume us, as the late General understood the menacing Bengal Tiger in “Life of Pi.”

At this hour of Yizkor, many among us remember departed fathers and mothers. What price would we not willingly pay to see them again, to meet them again, to learn from them again, and again to consult their wisdom and experience? Like General Romm’s father – for whose renewed company he so wistfully yearned – our parents taught us to aim high, to aspire to lofty goals, to ascend to the great heights which they (sometimes alone and not always realistically) believed were within our grasp. They would have given us the moon itself.

Some among us at this hour of Yizkor remember sons and daughters taken far too young, fallen before their missions were complete, before they had fully triumphed over life’s challenges or been vindicated in personal struggles. Their brief lives went by at super-sonic speeds and their jarring departure has left parents wounded and battered.

At this hour of Yizkor, many of us recall beloved siblings: brothers – in many ways brothers-at-arms – who had our backs, who shared our earliest memories and who knew us all too well. Sisters – confidantes and comrades – who gave us cover and supported our positions and knew our pain and our joys. If battles past have strained these often longest-lived of relationships, it is time to make peace and redress grievances with those who have – in fact – been our allies all along.

Finally, there are those among us at this hour of Yizkor who recall the memory and the lives of husbands and wives: they who once captured our hearts. Those life partners were our trusted co-

pilots with whom we shared world-views and hopes, together with whom we withstood headwinds and confronted outside resistance and flack. Together we created and commanded our shared home bases. They were our beloved wing-men (or women), going above and beyond to assure our success and our safety, feeling and sharing and bearing the consequences of all our ups and downs. They remained at our side even through the most turbulent of flights. Their passing left us feeling quite Solitary indeed.

Each of us remembering and mourning departed loved ones has endured painful loss and trauma. Major General Giora Romm believed that “One can rebuild and regain his previous life even after the most traumatic experience.” Here we are – at this hour of Yizkor – with loved ones, with family and friends, with neighbors, honoring this Holy Day with our community, thankful for a New Year, aspiring to a brighter and more refined future, inspired by the example of our departed and grateful for the time we were granted with them. We are living out the creed articulated by the late General, the fallen Ace. We are embracing life, even on the heels of bitter trauma and painful loss.

As we pray this Yom Kippur to be written, to be sealed in the Book of Life, we wisely emulate Giora Romm’s example. That fighting Ace and author went to extraordinary lengths to assure that his grandchildren, and their children, and we would know exactly who he was, what he valued, and all he was willing to risk for his family and to sacrifice for his people and his nation. He acted on those convictions with all but unparalleled vigor, determination, and resilience.

At this hour of Yizkor let us honor our own departed by making clear who we are because they so touched our lives. Let us remember them with the prayerful words of Prophets, framed millennia ago in terms that the State of Israel’s very first Fighter Ace – now also of blessed memory – would surely appreciate:

HASHKIFA MI-ME’ON KODSHECHA MIN HA-SHAMAYIM. “Look down from Your holy Abode, from the highest Heavens” – and bless this community even as it grieves. V’HA-MASKILIM YAZ-HIRU K’ZOHAR HA-RAKIYA, U-MATZDIKEI HA-RABIM KA-KOCHAVIM L’OLAM VA’ED.

May the precious souls we now honor with Yizkor be radiant as the bright, vast expanse of the sky, and may those who have inspired us and shaped us into our best selves shine like the stars forever and ever.

They “have slipped the surly bonds of Earth... and touched the face of God.”