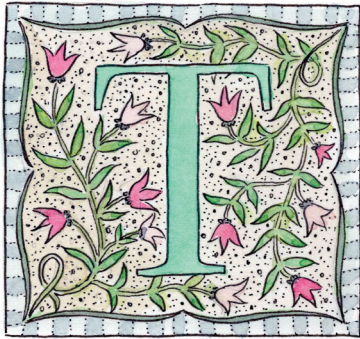


S. ILAN TROEN

Mourning and Memorialization

My first seder without my daughter and son-in-law



THE PREFIX “re” acquired special significance in the Zionist experience in 1922 when the League of Nations authorized the “re-constitution” of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. The Jews were to “re-turn,” “re-build,” and “re-store” their ancient home as a living people. Since

October 7, 2023, re-silience or “bounding back,” has been added to those terms of renewal. It describes Israelis’ determined and energetic response to the massacres and destruction wrought by Hamas’s carefully planned, unprovoked, and tragically unanticipated attack. Thousands of terrorists decimated entire communities committed to living and making the desert bloom in the Gaza Envelope, a swath of land that forms the long border between Israel and Gaza.

Today “resilience” is a more complex challenge than the original call for renewal of the Jewish national homeland. It is not about

new beginnings and the feasibility of innocent beliefs. There is a new, unexpected, and bitter experience of unanticipated costs. After 75 years of independence and apparent legitimacy, Israel sustained a pogrom of staggering proportions. And in its aftermath, Israelis are called to defend themselves before the international community: What measures can they legitimately take to protect themselves from the declared intention to annihilate them? Tens of thousands of refugees cannot return to their destroyed or threatened homes along the Gaza Envelope and the borders with Lebanon and Syria in the north. Crops cannot be harvested; fields are overgrown; businesses, offices, hotels are vacant; schools are empty with no foreseeable date of return. We are left to overcome daunting challenges without the energizing innocence that sustained generations of earlier pioneers.

Our daughter Shachar Deborah, our son-in-law Shlomi Mathias, and their three children were members of Kibbutz Holit in the Gaza Envelope. The pioneering engagement of the parents ended abruptly when they were murdered by Hamas terrorists early on October 7, 2023, Simchat Torah—or, as it has come to be known, the “Black Shabbat.” We had been promised: “Never Again.” It had become an article of faith to be acted on. But now we can never again believe “never again.”

What will it take this year to be resilient?



From Passover through Holocaust Memorial Day, and then Memorial Day for the Fallen and Victims of Terror, questions displace what we thought we knew. Memorialization, in Hebrew *hantsacha*, is ongoing. The word “remember” is one of the most common in the Bible, found 169 times in the first five books of the Torah alone.

Last year, we enjoyed the seder with Deborah, Shlomi, and their chil-

dren at our home in the Negev where we ended with the traditional cry, “Next year in Jerusalem!” This year we were indeed in Jerusalem, hosted by our son Judah and daughter-in-law Hadassah. But it didn’t feel entirely like redemption. Deborah and Shlomi’s absence was painfully present. So was the miracle that their children, Shir, Shakked, and Rotem, survived to celebrate with us. But the traditional prayer of Shehecheyanu was manifestly double-edged. As Hadassah commented before Kiddush, even as at Kol Nidrei we ask to be allowed to pray with the transgressors, on this night we felt the need to ask permission to rejoice. The commandment to retell the Exodus demanded renewed reflection. Commemoration is a puzzle, literally a challenge.

Pesach is an active and interactive commemoration. Even if we are knowledgeable, wise, elderly, and know the Torah, the Haggadah reiterates our obligation to retell the story of the Exodus and to teach it to our children. In every generation, we are to see ourselves, and to be seen, as though we ourselves were taken out of Egypt. The reminder is stern and urgent: This is no mere story about an event of the distant past. We have adopted the Sephardi tradition of our daughter-in-law Susan, in which we reenact the hurried departure by passing the matzoh, wrapped in a family heirloom, from one to the other:

“Where are you coming from?”

“Egypt.”

“Where are you going?”

“Jerusalem.”

This year we heard and fully understood the Haggadah’s repudiation of “never again”: “In every generation they rise up against us to destroy us.” We reaffirmed that “never again” was mistaken. We were forced to acknowledge that there is no personal guarantee entailed in “And the Almighty saves us from their hands,” that these words refer-

ence the Jewish people as a whole, not the countless Jews throughout history, and now, who were not saved.

Knowing and remembering is essential to our present resilience, as individuals and as a people. This year Pesach posed new questions. How could this night not be different from all other nights after October 7? How will we and our children and their children remember and commemorate October 7?

The call to remember is frequent, even insistent. As bereaved parents, we've been invited to discuss commemoration in a committee in our municipality. The initiative reflects a consensus that October 7 demands a separate category—even beyond the extension of Yom HaZikaron to include victims of terror as well as fallen soldiers.

New monuments, including one on Mount Herzl, will record the names and stories of those slaughtered. What will ensure that future generations remember what happened, as if they had been here? What do we need them to know?



Much of our hope these days comes from the nation itself—its institutions and people. Our orphaned granddaughters, Shir (21) and Shakked (19), and their brother Rotem (16) have been embraced and supported by Zionist society in keeping with a tradition inaugurated to care for young survivors of the notorious Kishinev pogrom of 1903. Others before them, such as the refugee children of Youth Aliyah and the Shoah from Europe and the massive aliyah from the Arab Middle East and North Africa, benefited from an extensive network of youth villages, residential institutions, and numerous programs developed in Israel. It is one of the most extensive systems for the care of youth in any modern society.

The children are supported within and outside this network. Like

many others, they have an extensive family in Israel. The kibbutz or moshav is also a family that provides community, shared memories, and emotional and psychological support. The level of support from individuals and communities in Israel and the Diaspora is extraordinary.

Still, the trauma remains. “You know,” Shir observed, “it would have been easier for me if Mom and Dad had been killed in a traffic accident.” But this was no accident. It was a pogrom carried out in the “safe room” of their home, in the homeland that promised the Jewish people security.

There is widespread recognition that the target was not only those living in border communities but all Jews. They and the Jewish state are targeted for destruction. This fundamental antisemitic core may be denied by the politically “progressive” who join in chanting “from the river to the sea.” Yet blatant antisemitic expressions and actions are being enacted even in the most comfortable and allegedly safe Diaspora communities. There is no alternative preferable to standing our ground at home. Jews in Israel and abroad appreciate that resuming the Zionist project is both a personal and a national necessity.

That is the embodiment and essence of our resilience. Persisting in such an ambitious project at this precarious time entails serious personal, financial, and political costs. The war, as I write, is ongoing. Many of us are impatient with the government. The IDF is still fighting in Gaza and in the north. The hostages, carried off like trophies by Hamas terrorists many months ago, are still in mortal peril in Gaza. Their families swing between despair and hope. Thousands of citizens from the north and south are dispersed to temporary accommodations with no date of return home. The demand for greater speed and efficiency is insistent and increasingly shrill. The slow pace and the lack of certainty and security are becoming unbearable.

Israelis firmly refuse to accept the disaster of October 7 as final

and definitive. How to bring this war to a successful conclusion is a primary subject of our conversations. How do we help one another and ourselves to carry on? What temporary measures are necessary? What measures will lead to successful return and recovery? What happens if Israel responds to attacks from Gaza, Hezbollah, Iran, and elsewhere? What happens if Israel fails to respond? Resilience requires calculation and recalculation. How many families will feel safe returning to Sderot and Kiryat Shmona? Will they be safe? Will schools be able to reopen next year? How many of the teachers will return? Where will life and work be able to resume? When will return be feasible? Risk, doubt, necessity, and desire compete in the effort to imagine options.

Along with this perplexity, too many Israelis bear profound sadness and pain. The state social services organize meetings and activities to encourage and support resilience, *chosen* in Hebrew. My wife and I participate in one such forum for bereaved parents, led by the head of social services in our community. No two stories and circumstances are the same. The details are heartbreaking. Yet there is inexplicable comfort in being able to speak about our pain knowing it is shared, heard, and understood. “I was at a loss. I couldn’t bring myself to celebrate Purim this year,” one father confides. We all nod, acknowledging the chasm between ourselves now and life as we knew it. The world irrevocably changed on October 7.

So many of us are forced to deal with memorialization. We, our children, and our orphaned grandchildren are repeatedly asked to participate in public ceremonies honoring the memory of Deborah and Shlomi’s personal and professional lives. They were accomplished musicians who helped to found Hagar, the bilingual Arabic and Hebrew school in Beersheba, where our grandchildren were enrolled and where Shlomi taught music before they moved to Holit. There is discussion of dedicating a music room or music prize

or holding an annual concert in their memory. Songs have been written about them, and their own songs have been aired on public and social media, recognition sadly enhanced by the circumstances of their deaths. Schools, classmates, colleagues in the workplace, neighbors, and friends reach out. We were invited to plant trees on Tu B'Shvat as a memorial to the victims of October 7.

But what and how to remember? Will it be the heroism, suffering, and resistance of those confronted by the cruelty of the terrorists? Will it be the blame inevitably assigned to leaders who failed to prevent the tragedy and left citizens to defend themselves against murderous terrorists and impossible odds? Will it be resilience? Israel has extensive experience in memorializing the Holocaust: initially focusing on the heroism of ghetto fighters and shaming collaborators, and decades later turning to the experiences of victims and survivors. With our soldiers still deployed, the threat along our borders unresolved, and our citizens still held hostage in Gaza, there is no sequence of stages. They occur all at once.



At the funeral, parents, brothers and sisters, friends and colleagues, and each of the children spoke before Deborah and Shlomi were buried, side by side. The families deliberated about what to inscribe on a shared headstone and tombstones. The children's wishes were paramount. The inscription says they were murdered while defending their home at Kibbutz Holit on October 7, 2023. They rejected the formula *al kiddush Hashem* (for the sanctity of God). Their parents were not "martyrs"; they did not willingly sacrifice their lives in God's name. Their parents were murdered because they were Jews, defending their son Rotem in their safe room. The children also declined to inscribe *Hashem yikom damam* (may the Lord avenge

their blood). They neither question Divine absence on that morning nor demand Divine justice in the future.

The words inscribed speak directly to the kind of resilience evidenced in their parents' lives and essential to making the desert bloom. Tradition invoked the formulaic assertion: "May their souls be bound up with the living." The names of their parents' parents, their relationships as siblings, and their contributions to society are inscribed.

Most poignant, the children chose to inscribe their parents' choices: verse 8:7 from the Song of Songs, on love that cannot be extinguished, and the opening bars of Ehud Manor's and Matti Caspi's "Brit Olam" ("Everlasting Covenant"), the song they sang at their wedding, which anticipates the lovers' union on the wedding night that will last until their hearts stop beating. Lying side by side in the soil of the Negev, their memorial speaks of their love and commitment to family and community, Jewish tradition, contemporary Hebrew culture, and to each other.

Resilience is epitomized by the command "and you shall choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). This demands an ongoing and perpetual commitment. There is no quick bounding back. Continuity and rebuilding require a focus beyond personal and national tragedy. We are determined to go forward. There is no alternative to returning, rebuilding, and restoring a secure home in Eretz Israel. *