



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The 23rd Song

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RECENTLY, in the Gaza Strip, a Jewish song was composed and sung. Its unlikely origin and subsequent story embody Judaism itself.

Colonel Golan Vach of the IDF had been silently stationed in Gaza with his fellow soldiers, in the bleakness of night, when a voice, humming a song, suddenly intruded on the darkness. It came from a comrade, Yossi Hershkovitz. Vach, as Arutz Sheva reports, was intrigued and inquired as to the origin of the tune:

I called out, “Yoss?” and he replied, “Yes.” I asked him what he was humming and he said it was a song that he used to sing to himself. I asked him if he had written the tune and he said yes. I asked him when and he replied, “When we started walking.”

The song, in other words, had been composed in the midst of war. Vach told Yossi Hershkovitz that he would like to hear it again. “I asked him to sing it.”

That the two would be so interested in music, even in the midst of battle, was not a surprise. Yossi Hershkovitz, a celebrated educator and principal of the Pelech High School for boys in Jerusalem, was a gifted violinist who often played on behalf of the sick in Israel’s hospitals. Golan Vach was from a musically famous family in Israel that had released a number of

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albums. Vach later described how he asked his comrade to teach him the tune: “This was a very special moment when we were sitting there. It was total darkness, and he was sitting next to me and singing me a song.” The tune Hershkovitz sang was newly composed, but the age-old Hebrew words were first written by a man who was himself a singer and soldier: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.*

Thus did Hershkovitz teach Golan Vach a new way to sing the 23rd Psalm, a psalm that truly describes Vach’s life. Vach leads Israel’s National Rescue Unit, which is activated in case of disaster; he has overseen responses to catastrophes not only in Israel, but in humanitarian missions around the world. His entire career has been spent in the valley of the shadow of death, and yet faith has sustained him throughout, especially when he entered the greatest scene of suffering he had ever experienced.

Vach has seen death and destruction all over the world, but nothing compared with what he suddenly saw in the kibbutzim and communities near Gaza that were attacked on October 7. He describes in an interview with CNS News how he was sent to the area almost immediately after, and one sentence suffices to describe the evidence of evil he encountered: “I found a mother lying, protecting her baby. And she was shot in the back. And the baby was beheaded.” But God, he believed, was there in that hell, and made Himself manifest:

It was the fourth day of the mission to recover bodies...it was also my 49th birthday. We were

driving back to our base, and, after having carried out more than 250 dead Jews from the fire and destruction, I felt it was the saddest birthday of my life. Just before the sun set, I asked a small wish of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* [the Holy One, blessed be He]: I asked for Am Yisrael to win.

And suddenly, out of nowhere, two terrorists opened fire from the right side of the road. We charged at them. One member of our group was wounded, but we killed both Hamas gunmen...I thanked *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that I was granted the opportunity to revert back to being a soldier, not a body carrier, for a few minutes.

Golan Vach found himself, as David described in his psalm, “in the presence of my enemies,” and there, in the valley of death, he found God while defending his people. No wonder he was so inspired by Yossi Hershkovitz’s singing of this song.

The two of them, singing in the darkness, were the personifications of Judaism itself. For in the Talmud, the obligation to write a Torah scroll once in our lives is derived from Moses’s final exhortation: “Write for yourselves this song.” Judaism, according to this scriptural simile, is a song. It is not turgid text—it is sheet music. The point, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggested, is that no single note makes a song; and “as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time.”

Thus did Hershkovitz and Vach, singing together, join note to note, and life to life. Strikingly, interviews with Vach highlight how in these trying times he has found God above all in the connectedness of the Jewish people. The vituperative division in Israel prior to October 7, he reflected in an interview with Jewish Action, “was so toxic, so wrong. And we couldn’t stop it.” But suddenly, in the valley of the shadow of death, Vach saw the metaphysical bonds that link one to another in Israeli society:

When we soldiers were tasked with carrying out the burnt remains of young people from the music festival, the bodies were lovingly handled by the wonderful Haredi volunteers of the *chevra kadisha* [those who care for dead]; no one was willing to go to such a place, but they did. That’s the people of Israel.... And I know that HaKadosh Baruch Hu is guiding us and that He loves us.

These feelings of unity were similarly felt by Yossi Hershkovitz. On Friday, November 10, Hershkovitz recorded, from Gaza, a video to be shown to his students, emphasizing Jewish unity in his message: “Today in Israel there is no right wing, no left wing, no Haredim. Just Jews.” That evening, Hershkovitz fell in battle, killed by a bomb that Hamas had planted at the entrance to one of its terror tunnels.

Among the immediate mourners was Golan Vach, who found that the physical loss was compounded by another loss: “What most upset me was that I couldn’t remember the song.” It was as though he had been severed from Hershkovitz himself, a disconnecting of notes, a de-linking of lives. But God, it seems, was again with him in the valley of the shadow of death, for at the very moment when Vach bid farewell to his friend, the song suddenly came back to him. “At the funeral,” Vach recounts, “I remembered it.”

Thus did Vach, as the writer Dovi Safier put it, engage in the most unusual mission of his career. The leader of Israel’s National Rescue Unit rescued his friend’s final composition. Siting at the shiva with Hershkovitz’s children, Vach sang their beloved father’s last song to his sons and daughters, ensuring that it would be forever remembered, transforming the ephemeral into the eternal. The Hershkovitz children followed the shiva by recording their father’s song together, reflecting how “as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life.”

Hershkovitz’s teenage son, Be’eri, visited America soon after the shiva and described it all: “As a result of my loss of my father, I feel like I am kind of walking in the *geh tzalmavet*, the valley of the shadow of death. However, I am aware that my mother, my family, *Hakadosh Barukh Hu* and my father as well are with me as well.”

Then Hershkovitz’s musical son sat at the piano and played the tune his father had composed, singing: *I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*

The “you” of course, refers to the divine, but suddenly his father was with him as well, as the music connected a note to a note, and a life to a life, in the melody of the Jewish people. The psalm he sang embodied an eternal nation; it bespeaks a faith maintained throughout centuries despite so many deaths. It is this faith that guides so many in a country that is in sorrow, with so many soldiers separated from their families, and so many hostages still held. There are, in other words, multitudes in Israel who long to utter the words of another psalm as well: “When the Lord returned the captives of Zion, we were as dreamers. Then was our mouths filled with laughter, and our tongues with song.” 🎵