Back when I was a student at Jewish Theological Seminary in

Manhattan, I was lucky to receive a discounted rental apartment located close to school on 122nd street. When I previously lived in Brooklyn, Bensonhurst, my commute was ninety minutes long, so I was thrilled to cut that down to just five minutes!

There was one downside to my good luck: I had to move quickly. But moving fast was going to be a challenge because by then I had managed to accumulate some furniture, some kitchen ware and some appliances, so I would require the services of professional movers. I asked around and a company owned by Israelis was recommended to me.

The day of the big move arrived. The doorbell rang. When I opened the door, I saw to my utter dismay that the two movers looked like college kids. They were just a little taller than me and both of them were a bit underweight.

They stepped into my apartment and I showed them what items needed to be carried to the truck. I also suggested that I could help them in case they needed a third hand. (Looking at them, I honestly thought that I would have to do most of the heavy lifting.)

To their credit, these two young Israelis didn’t take offense at my offer. They also did not waste any time chatting. Instead, they set to work quickly. They began by picking up the heaviest items with little effort. In fact, they made it look as easy as if they were carrying a down comforter. They even jokingly suggested that I climb on top of the dresser and they would carry me to the truck as well.

I rode in the truck with them from Brooklyn to Morningside. During that time we had a chance to talk. They told me that they recently served in the IDF and were now working in the US post army to earn some extra money. They shared with me that they both served in “*Kravi*” - the IDF Field Combat Troops.

I marveled at their incredible physical and emotional strength. Once again, this encounter reminded me of a totally different type of Jews that the State of Israel cultivated. Those Jews were young people who had been raised to be strong, defiant and resilient.

I also remember when I first encountered the IDF soldiers. It was when we left the Soviet Union on our way to an Aliyah in Israel. Along our journey we had to spend a night in the Budapest airport and the soldiers were there to protect and assist us. Tall and dark skinned with wavy brown hair and with rifles in their hands, they looked at us with amusement. And I looked at them… well - let’s just say it added to the excitement of moving to Israel!

Beginning in the first decade of the 20th century, even before the State of Israel was born, young Jews from Eastern European countries were making an Aliyah. They went to Israel driven by the Zionist dream that began when the First Zionist Congress was held in Basel in 1897. As a matter of fact, Israel’s future Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, made Aliyah in 1906.

A great desire to escape the pogroms that swept Eastern Europe at the end of 19th was another reason that played into the decision of these young pioneers – the *chalutzim*, enticing them to come to what was then Palestine.

Perhaps the bloodiest of all those pogroms was the Kishinev pogrom. It took place on April 19-21, 1903. Much like the massacre on October 7, Jews were killed, gravely injured from senseless beatings, women were raped, and houses were burnt.

Hayim Nahman Bialik described the scenario in his poem “In the City of Slaughter,” which he wrote in 1904. The poem starts with the gruesome account of the aftermath:

”Behold on tree, on stone, on fence, on mural clay,

The spattered blood and dried brains of the dead.”

What Bialik describes here is unfathomable, but his focus is on the fact that Jews were defenseless, that men just stood there, watching their wives and daughters being raped and sons been slathered before they themselves were killed. He wrote:

“Crushed in their shame, they saw it all;

They did not pluck their eyes out; they

Beat not their brains against the wall!

The young Jews who came to Palestine were the “new breed.” They did not want to be like the Jews of Kishinev, helplessly waiting to die. They were determined to meet the challenges head on.

They arrived in this promised land and immediately were committed to its success. They began by cultivating the land by draining the swamps, and developing agriculture (including planting orange trees) in order to prepare for what they thought would be a mass Aliyah.

Besides the tough physical conditions, they also had to face some hostilities from the Arab population. As a result, Jews started forming armed resistance to defend themselves from occasional Arab attacks, especially once the attacks escalated to mass riots, such as 1920 Nebi Musa riots, the 1921 Jaffa riots, the 1929 Palestine riots, the 1936 Jaffa riots, and the 1936-1939 Arab revolt.

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I in 1920 when the mandate was assigned to Britain, the group of resisters was formally named Haganah - “The Defense.” Now the members of Haganah were not only defending Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) from Arabs, but also they organized activities against the British anti - immigration policy.

The members of this underground Jewish militia were fearless, engaging regularly in risky operations. While Haganah consisted mostly of men, there were also some brave women fighting alongside. The Haganah clearly stated in its regulations that joining was open to: “Every Jewish male or female, who is prepared and trained to fulfill the obligation of national defense.”

During World War II, some of these young people even went back to Europe to fight the Nazis. The most famous, perhaps, is an Israeli poet Hannah Szenes (Senesh) known for her poem, “A Walk to Caesarea.” or most famously, “Eli Eli.”

Hannah was born in Budapest and immigrated to Palestine in 1939. In 1943 she became a member of Palmach - the elite combined strike forces and *sayeret* (reconnaissance) unit of the Haganah. She participated in the course for paratroopers and in March of 1944, she was dropped into Yugoslavia to aid anti-Nazi forces. Being Hungarian, she was asked to enter Hungary but unfortunately she was captured in June of the same year after entering. Hannah was sent to prison in Budapest, where she was tortured. She did not reveal any information. She was given a chance to beg for a pardon but she chose death by firing squad. She was killed in November 1944. Hannah was twenty- three years old.

As soon as the State of Israel was formed on May 14, 1948, it had to fight its first war the next day. On May 26, 1948, less than two weeks into its creation, Haganah merged with two other organizations - Irgun

and Lehi - to form the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). During that time, Israel was fighting for its survival as ALL the surrounding Arab nations, including Egypt, Transjordan, Syria and expeditionary forces from Iraq, invaded through Arab areas. (This scenario was not much different than what we still see today).

Throughout its short history, Israel was forced to fight multiple wars. A tiny country, it always had to be on the alert for possible attacks as had their predecessors, the Jews of the European Shtetles, who were always ready for the pogroms.

There was a difference, though. The European Jewry had their suitcases ready in case they had to flee but the Israelis took a contrary approach. Instead of preparing to run from their enemies, they continued to strengthen the IDF so that they would always be ready to fight back and defend themselves and their homes.

Just recently, the IDF archive released a recording of a November 1973 cabinet meeting in which Golda Meir is heard saying: “We will be forgiven for many things, all but one - and that’s weakness. The moment we are marked as weak, it’s over.”

The consensus then was that there was no chance for genuine peace with the Arabs. Remember - this meeting took place 51 years ago, right after the Yom Kippur War.

Over the course of the seventy-six years, Israel constantly had to defend itself against its enemies while at the same time, it was forced to defend itself from the **false reputation** of being the aggressor.

Dr. Micah Goodman, an American- Israeli philosopher and a leading voice in Israel and North America on Zionism, Judaism and Bible, said the following in his recent podcast on The Times of Israel: “Israel has to protect two reputations: one - in the Western World, and the second one in the Middle East.” He said that we want to be seen as “good guys.” In fact, American Jews are obsessed with that reputation, he added. But in the Middle East we want to be seen as unpredictable, as a little crazy, as a nation of people who will do whatever has to be done. In other words - we want to be loved in the West but feared in the Middle East.

The problem is that these two reputations are mutually exclusive. If we protect our good guy reputation in the West, we will lose the war because we will lose our tough guy reputation in the Middle East.

The Talmud teaches:” If someone rises to kill you, rise up to kill him first.” In order for Israel to keep deterring its enemies, she unfortunately has to constantly stay on guard and vigilant. It must be up-to-date with its forces visible to the enemies. That strong presence may actually prevent future attempted attacks in the first place, and so there will be no need for the use of force.

October 7 proved that the minute that Israel found itself weakened, it was attacked in a vicious way that it had never experienced before.

On October 7, the West loved us. It’s true. As I travelled with Tony and the girls to Europe this summer, I heard people say: “We supported Israel on October 7, but October 8, when Israel started bombing Gaza, we could not support it any longer.”

This reminded me of a book I recently read by Dara Horn with the catchy title: “People Love Dead Jews.”

Dara Horn opens her book in the first chapter by stating: “People love dead Jews. Living Jews - not so much.” To support this statement, she recalls an incident that happened in the Ann Frank Museum in 2018. Ann Frank’s diary has been translated into seventy languages and has sold more than thirty million copies worldwide. And her house receives over a million visitors each year. But when a young employee tried to wear his yameka to work, his employers told him to hide it under a baseball cap. “The museum goal was neutrality,” a spokesperson explained to the Newspaper. “AcJew seen with a yameka might interfere with the museum’s position.”

Similarly, the image of the soldiers as I described to you at the beginning of this sermon, which makes us, Jews, proud, causes a very different reaction from most of the rest of the world.

We could predict the reaction of the world on October 8 when Israel had to defend itself. As soon as the first casualties among Palestinians were reported, the world turned on Israel. While Israel tried to restore “its strong and fierce reputation” in the Middle East by going all the way, stomaching the losses of its soldiers, the West turned against Israel and with it, against all Jews.

I will not spend time sharing multiple examples of the raging anti-semitism taking place around the world and in America. I will say this: when I saw the videos, Abigail shared with me, of pro-Palestinian protestors in OH State University campus on October 7 ( of all days to select!), I was sick to my stomach. When Jewish students gathered to commemorate the Black Sabbath and to mourn the losses of so many men, women and children brutally murdered by Hamas, this was a show of intention to inflict even more emotional distress on the Jewish youth.

At the same time, I was proud of Abigail and her friends who were not afraid to wave Israeli flags, sing Am Yisrael Chai, and wear their Stars of David proudly.

Since October 7 we often hear from our friends and family members. They say, “I am afraid to wear my yameka on the subway” or they note, “I am hiding my Star of David under my shirt” or even say, “I don’t feel safe attending Jewish gatherings.”

Friends, if we continue to hide our identity, then Hamas and other terrorist organizations have achieved their goal. They finally managed to intimidate us. So I encourage you to wear your Stars of David proudly and defiantly.

I am sure you were as proud as I was, listening to Ben earlier in the service. Remember, what he said. “It is up to us to always fight back, and to never relent in our expression of our Judaism, as that is who we are…by going to synagogue, celebrating Shabbat, celebrating being Jewish and never shying away from our cultural identity.”

As for the actual fighting that Israeli young women and men (all of them just college age ) have to engage on multiple fronts, they do so with pride and courage. I know, because I spoke to many of my friends and their children in Israel.

Just listen to the recording of the conversation that our confirmation students had with eighteen-year old Gal Voslovitzer, who recently finished boot camp and currently serves in the IDF.

And here is what Ari Lachman, the young man who we helped to collect money for helmets for his unit, and who is now on active duty in Lebanon, said to me. “As newly drafted fighters who were immediately deployed and had to fight a real war, we are used to spending a lot of time on the base, without going home. We expect to celebrate the High Holy Days with friends here and not with our families. No doubt that there are, and will be, many challenges and losses. There is a fear of action, but every single one of us understands the significance and importance of the task. Because even as we have to fight during the holidays, we know that this can provide a sense of security to our families and all people of Israel. We manage to support each other and keep our moral high. We are also grateful to your community for your support. All Israel is one people.”

Golda Meir was just a child when she learned about the Kishinev pogrom. When she heard that some adults decided to fast to remember the victims of the massacre, she said, “You fast for the adults, and I will fast for the little children.”

Shortly we will hear the words from the Haftarah portion from Isaiah 58:1-14. In it, God instructs us to fast - not the kind of fast that we embrace to lose weight or just because it is a ritual we have to perform since our ancestors fasted.

Instead, God wants us to fast on Yom Kippur so we can rise above the corporeal reality of day-to-day life, focusing our minds solely on the spiritual and not on the physical. We also fast to reconcile with God and humanity.

Friends, this Yom Kippur may our fast also reflect our sorrow for the lives lost during the ongoing war. We fast for the battles we face in overcoming the modern pogrom - one which we couldn’timagine to be possible. But we also fast for the incredible spiritual strength thatJewish people possess. We are not the Jews of Kishinev any longer.

Among all the stories of horror of October 7, there are the stories of heroic acts that we try to focus on. While the Israeli government and IDF was taken by surprise and help did not come for hours, ordinary Israeli citizens acted swiftly and became heroes.

There was Rami Davidian, who went back and forth in to the dangerous zones to rescue people, hiding from terrorists and Tali Hadad, who rescued her injured son, by fighting the terrorists and Aner Shapira, who tossed the grenades the terrorists threw into the bunker where he was hiding with a dozen other people who attended the Nova Festival, back at them; and so many more unsung heroes!

These modern Jews are the Maccabees of our time, the Jews who are defiant and resilient.

Friends - let us be those brave and fearless Jews who rise for our brothers and sisters. *Ve hayikar - lo leached klal* - most importantly, we should never be afraid.

Am Yisrael Chai