Yizkor: October 7th
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יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבה

ואף אחד לא בא

These are the opening lines of the powerful despairing and challenging poem by Assaf Gur, from the collection, *Shiva: Poems of October 7*. You know what the first line is from. And the poem is called "Kaddish." Very often I am asked what the kaddish means and why we say it when we lose a loved one. Is it about death? Is it about mourning? Surprisingly, neither. The Kaddish declares God's greatness. "Magnified and sanctified is the great name," is how the first line of the Kaddish translates. My answer is usually something like: "The Kaddish is an affirmation of God, accepting that there are certain things that are beyond our control." But the second line of Assaf Gur's poem turns it around. The two lines together in English are: "Magnified and sanctified is the great name, but nobody came." That is, God was not great on that day. The poem goes on to accuse God of absence on that day, letting Satan do his work.

Assaf Gur's poem haunts me. On Shmini Atzeret, the Hebrew yahrzeit of October 7th, I will distribute it so we can study it together. For today, I just want to note the cry of despair, the challenge to God, asking where God was on such a black day. For today, I want to share a response to this challenge, an extraordinary book that was edited by Yair Agmon and Oriya Mevorach, that was the #1 bestseller in Israel this year, *יום אחד באוקטובר,* just released last week in English translation as *One Day in October*. It is an absolutely beautiful book. My copy came in the mail a week ago and I could not put it down. The editors collected hundreds of stories of heroism on October 7th, and selected forty stories for the books, forty stories told by the survivors, or their loved ones if they did not survive, that represent the diversity of responses to catastrophe, and the diversity of the Israeli population through age, occupation, ethnicity and religion. Yes, most of the stories are about police or soldiers.

Why police? Because they were on the ground in the villages and kibbutzim fighting to protect people before the army arrived. But there is a Catholic father of a child taken hostage, and there are Druze Israelis, who are Muslim. And among the Jews, they cover the spectrum from ultra-Orthodox to ultra-secular. And from Ashkenazi to Sephardi, Ethiopian and Russian, farmers and city-people. If you want to get a sense of who Israelis are, read this book.

I want to do a different type of sermon today, as we prepare for Yizkor. Rather than hear my voice, I want you to hear the stories and voices of these heroes recounted in this very special book.

What is most moving about the book are the different types of heroisms. There are stories, of course, of police and soldiers running into the line of fire to protect civilians. There is Matan Abargil, the 19-year-old soldier who hugged a grenade to his chest to protect his comrades. But then there is the story of Shlomo Ron, the 85-year-old man who sat calmly in his armchair in the living room of his house while his wife, daughters, grandson and caretaker hid in the safe-room. A safe-room is the room in a house that is designed to protect from missile attacks (a building code requirement in Israel) but were not designed to lock on the inside and protect from a manned invasion. Shlomo Ron sat in his chair assuming correctly that the Hamas terrorists who entered his house would shoot him and assume that he was a lonely old man sitting in his armchair with no one else at home. That sacrificial act of quiet bravery saved the rest of his family.

Gali Eilon is a 15-year-old girl, whose father was killed early that morning, figured out that the Israeli soldiers who came by her house did not have any idea where to go and who needed help, so she immediately sent a message on the kibbutz WhatsApp group for people to message her when they were in trouble, and all day long she sent on that intel to the army commander who gave her his number. The army said she was like an intelligence operator coordinating the entire operation, all from within the safe room of her house. At the end of the day, her phone was down to 1 percent and she could hear the terrorists speaking in Arabic just outside her house. At that time her mother was

at the gas station outside the kibbutz where the army was gathering the survivors, and she was frantic about finding her daughter (who was not home with her but at her grandmother's house). She started screaming that she could not get a hold of Gali, and the soldiers came up to her, as Gali tells the story, "and said 'Gali who?' and she explained to them that her daughter Gali is back in the kibbutz with her grandmother. And one of the soldiers jumped up and said, 'That's *our* Gali!' and showed her my picture on WhatsApp. And she says, 'Yes, that's my daughter.' And he went, 'What, she wasn't rescued yet?!' And my mom said, 'No!' and they all jumped up—how come nobody rescued Gali? So they sent us a force, urgently" and Gali and her grandmother were rescued.

Yosif Zeadna is a 47-year-old Bedouin driver who risked his life by driving his mini-van into the hell of what was the Nova dance festival to rescue the kids he had driven there the night before. He drove into live fire, and then sped across unmarked dirt roads to get "his kids" and anyone else he could pick up to safety.

Amit Man was a 22-year-old nurse who set up a trauma center in her kibbutz dental clinic and stayed there treating the wounded throughout that terrible day, dying from a gunshot would she suffered while saving people. As her sister tells the story, "They only found her body two days later. The people who found her saw that her bag of medical supplies was empty, down to the last band-aid. There was nothing left in her bag. For hours, she just kept treating and treating people until not even a single band-aid was left."

Camila Jesalva is a 31-year-old Filipina woman who refused to abandon the 95-year-old woman she cared for, managing to hush her when the older woman could not understand that she needed to stay quiet. When a terrorist finally breaks into their safe room, Camila bravely offers to give him all their valuables in exchange for their lives, and somehow manages to keep herself and the old woman alive.

Aner Shapira was a 22-year-old soldier who did his best to protect dozens of young people piled into a shelter at the Nova Festival. When a Hamas assailant threw a grenade in he picked it up and threw it back. And again and again. He managed to throw back seven live grenades until the eighth grenade kills him, which the terrorists realized they had to throw to him just a second before detonation. One of the people he was protecting was Hersh Goldberg-Polin, the American who was taken captive and then recently murdered in Gaza just before the Israeli army could get to his location.

Rami Davidyan is a 59-year-old man who drove his Toyota Corolla in the midst of battle to rescue young people sending him messages where they were. I drive a Toyota Corolla. Could my car have done that? Could I? As Rami tells the story, "At first I drove my own car, a Toyota Corolla, but soon after that I switched, I wanted a more massive car, one that could maneuver, so I took my son-in-law's car. And by the end of the night, both cars were full of bullet holes. Looking back, I realize that it was a miracle, I get it now. But at the time I was on autopilot."

Nasreen Yousef is a 46-year-old Druze woman who interrogated captured terrorists in Arabic, and then answered one of their phones and spoke to a Hamas commander pretending to be a Gazan woman near the border with Israel, a subterfuge that got intel on where a group of a hundred Hamas fighters were so that Israeli forces could take them out.

Yaakov Krasniansky was a 23-year-old soldier who was a yeshiva prodigy but then left that world to serve in the army, who fought to the end, holding off the invaders and saving many lives. As his religious mother tells the story, "In that battle, Yaakov gets shot in the leg. He goes to the side for a moment and takes care of it himself; he applies some kind of tourniquet to stop the bleeding, and he returns to fight. Then—it's hard for me even to think about it—he gets shot again, in the same wounded leg. Even then, he doesn't give up. He keeps shooting, keeps on killing terrorists. The third bullet that hits him fells him to the ground. But even then—after three bullets…he was lying down,

but he kept shooting and killing terrorists. He fought like that, wounded; sometimes he lost consciousness and then would regain it and go back to fighting some more. Then, when his body couldn't contain his soul any longer, the Holy One, blessed be He, gathered him in."

Most frustrating is the story of Shay Ashram, a 19-year-old surveillance soldier who was killed along with most of the women in her squadron as the border army outposts were quickly overtaken by the Hamas invaders. Surveillance soldiers have the job to watch across the border fence all day and report anything they see that is suspicious. Her father relates how she and her comrades knew that Hamas was planning something and knew how it would happen and reported everything to their commanders who reported it up the chain where it was not taken seriously and dismissed. As her father tells it: "Those girls, they were murdered in cold blood. They didn't have a single rifle, not even a gun. They couldn't save anyone, definitely not themselves. And even so, even though they were murdered unarmed, those girls are heroes. They're heroes because they spoke up, and they made their reports, and they shouted, and they gave warning. And even though no one—no one!—took them seriously, they never stopped insisting on the truth."

Stories of heroism are what we need to recount before Yizkor. These acts of bravery are the definition of what our tradition calls *Kedushat Hashem,* the sanctification of God's name, the religious act that the Kaddish seeks to describe. These actions bring redemption, not only for the heroes themselves and the people they saved, but for us as well. Yair Agmon, one of the two authors of this book, explains in the preface how he had fallen into a deep depression after October 7th until his co-author, Oriya Mevorach, came to him with this project. "This book lifted me out of depression," he writes in a prologue dated just last July. "I fell in love with the people I met through these stories, with their hearts, and with their values. Their stories are 'a still small voice' that soars above the noise and turmoil. These heroes don't know it, but they saved my life too."

Three structural themes develop through many of the stories, three points of realization. There is a point where each person begins to understand the immensity of what was happening, that it was not just rocket fire, and not just a few terrorists. Then there is a point when many of the people realize that they are about to die (whether they do or end up being saved). And finally there is the shiva, the week of mourning, where the families come to realize the extent of what their loved one did because people they saved come to make a shiva visit to the family and tell the story of what happened.

One thing I learned from these stories was how so many will ask forgiveness of their loved ones before they die. Here are some examples:

Amit Man, the nurse who died treating the wounded, says to her sister and mother on the phone, "I'm not going to get out of here alive. Mom, forgive me for everything, forgive me for everything. I love you, Mom. Forgive me for everything."

Irene Shavit, whose fiancée Netta Epstein was killed throwing himself on a grenade to protect her, manages to survive by hiding under his body so Hamas would think she was also dead. Before that she starting sending messages. "I told my parents what happened" she recalls, "and that I love them and that I'm sorry for everything if anything happens to me, and they're the best parents I could have asked for. I was sure that this was it."

Or Ben Yehuda is a 25-year-old army commander who bravely took her stand at the border. As she tells her story: "We reach the edge of the embankment. So I turn my head to the side, and see a sight I will never forget as long as I live. I remember the situation clearly. I peer, lift my head up, then bring my head down, then look to the side again—some five pickup trucks are coming at me, and packs of motorcyclists, and terrorists are hopping between the dunes, between the trees, all in combat vests and uniforms and advancing in our direction. I can't even count them; there are hundreds. Hundreds! And in the distance behind them are long lines of people from Gaza who are

just marching in our direction, some armed, some unarmed, and I say to myself, 'Well, that's it; this is where I'm going to die, right here on this spot. I'm going to die here.'...I remember looking up and apologizing to my children; in my heart I begged them to forgive me—they're so little, and so cute, and I'd never come back to them, never see them again." But she led her troops well and fought valiantly until the Gazans started to retreat, at least at that section. She was able to return to her children.

Yadin Gellman, a 30-year-old soldier, retells how he lay wounded with his friend David under a house with terrorists within. They ended up being rescued, but before that he tells how "we lost a large among of blood. I kept telling David that it would be okay, and we'd make it out of there, and he shouldn't worry, but I knew it was bull. At a certain point, I was sure that it was all over. I got on the radio with a friend of mine, someone who's also friends with Adva [his wife], and I asked him to tell Adva that I love her and that I'm sorry. And that was it. Then David asked me to pass on to his wife Anat that he loves her, and to tell his sons Shaked that he loves him and he's sorry. That was our report over the radio and that's how we said goodbye to our loved ones." David did die in the helicopter evac before they got to the hospital but Yadin survived.

Nasreen Yousef, the Druze woman who pretended to be a Gazan on the phone with a Hamas commander, tells about how the night after that terrible day "our oldest daughter, Shiran, comes over to me, and she's crying so hard, and I say to her, 'Sweetie, what happened?' and she says, 'Mommy, I'm so sorry that I didn't listen to you, and that I used to go to my friends without asking, and I'm so sorry that sometimes I was rude to you and annoyed you, I'm sorry Mommy; please forgive me!' I said to her, 'What's with you, what did you get into your head? You're my girl. When was I ever angry at you, sweetie; I'm not upset about anything.' She really thought it was the end. It was so terrifying."

Mickey, whose full name could not be published for security reasons, opens his story with the following chilling account: "Never in my whole life did I think that the idea of killing my wife and

daughter would ever cross my mind for even a fraction of a second. But there was a point there—when the terrorists were at the door of the safe room—a point when we realized that this was it. My wife and I look at each other in total silence when my daughter isn't looking, and my wife makes this sign of two fingers walking like legs and shakes her head 'No.' She's basically saying, without words, 'We're not going with them [as hostages].' Then she points her fingers like a gun and points it at herself, then at our daughter, then at me. That's basically her way of telling me, 'If they come in, kill me, then Netta, then yourself.' And I nod. And I put my hand over my heart, signaling her, 'I'm sorry; forgive me.' She signals that she's sorry too, and she smiles. A sad, sad smile." Thankfully, Mickey managed to save himself and his family.

Then there is the story of Eran Masas, a 45-year-old man who drove out to save people, and then went to work collecting bodies so that Hamas would not take them back to Gaza to ransom them back to Israel. Here he asks forgiveness of the dead: "There was this body of a girl that I picked up; I don't want to go into too much detail, but it was clear that she had been raped. I will never forget her. I asked her for her forgiveness for what they had done to her, and I covered her with her clothing."

Forgiveness is something we ask for ourselves, especially just before we die, and also for the dead as we care for them, apologizing to them for any indignities. This too is what we rehearse on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for death, where we stop eating and drinking, and beg forgiveness for our sins before God, before God's final mercy. Confession becomes desperate when we know the end is near because we have run out of time to do teshuvah, to fix things in life. That is the regret that we fear at the end of our days. Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for that, but we remember that this is a just a drill, and that really we still have time to make things better, to improve our relationships, to right any wrongs. The naturalness and purity with which these heroes asked forgiveness should teach us the purity of true repentance, inspiring us to make each day count.

The most extraordinary, most heart wrenching, story of forgiveness from *One Day in October* was that offered by Iris Haim, the mother of Yotam Haim, who was taken hostage but then killed by Israeli forces in a tragic incident of mistaken friendly fire. Yotam and two other hostages were killed, mistaken for terrorists. "One day during the shiva," his mother recalls, "a woman approached me and said, 'Iris, I'm the wife of the commander of that battalion, and all his soldiers are completely devastated; none of them are functioning; they just want to die.' I said to her, 'No, I have to speak to them right now!' She said to me, 'But they're in Gaza,' so I decided to record a voice message for them. I took the phone and sent them a message, spontaneously—I didn't sit and plan it, or write it out, I just recorded whatever came out of my mouth, and this is what I said to them: 'Hi, this is Iris Haim, Yotam's mother, and I wanted to tell you that we love you, we love you very very much, and we're not angry, and we're not judging, and what you did—with all the pain and regret—was probably the right thing to do at the moment....As soon as you can, please come here to us; we want to see you so much, to look you in the eye, and to give you a big hug.' And the soldiers came; they came as soon as they got out of Gaza. They came, these sweet soldiers with bowed heads, and they sat here with us, and we hugged them, and we told them that we weren't angry....We had heard about all kinds of tricks and ploys that Hamas tried in Gaza—how they would pretend to be hostages and speak in Hebrew, then attack. We weren't angry at them. We just hugged them and we cried together, and we told them about our wonderful Yotam." That is a type of forgiveness that only a saintly memory can inspire in us. The memory of her son inspires her and her husband to live on. His memory shines down upon them as a blessing.

Doron Perez lost his 22-year-son on October 7th, a tank commander. "People ask me," he says, "'Don't you have questions for God,' and I answer that I don't. For whatever reason, I don't. I don't believe we can ever fully comprehend God's ways; I don't believe that I have the answers to the question of divine justice in this world. Sometimes you have to know how to live with painful

questions, instead of accepting shallow, partial answers." Forgiving God is the hardest thing to do after that dark day last October. Assaf Gur questions if we can do that, in the poem on "Kaddish" with which I began. But remembering the heroism, even the everyday goodness, of those who lost their lives—remembering the old man who sat in his arm chair so they didn't go past him after they shot him—remembering these lives will inspire us to become better, to come together, with ourselves, and even with God. We continue with Yizkor.