

## Cast a Giant Shadow

Kol Nidre 5774

By Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

Michael Levin was born in 1984; the year the AIDS virus was identified, AT&T was broken up and the first Apple Macintosh went on sale. It was also the year a truck containing 500 kg of high explosives destroyed the US embassy in Beirut, killing 12 people – which brought the Lebanese Civil War to the attention of many Americans. Levin was the grandson of a Holocaust survivor and of a WWII vet and grew up in Eastern Pennsylvania where he developed a passion for the State of Israel. That passion turned into a commitment. Out of high school he made *Aliyah* to Israel - alone at age 18 - and joined the Israeli army. It was not an easy thing to do. While every Jewish child in Israel is conscripted into the military, for foreigners, it is harder. Israel depends on families to provide care, rest and support for their young soldiers. Those without family in the land have to find ways to provide for themselves – including very practical issues like finding apartments for leave days – usually unfurnished. There is an official term for those in the IDF who, for various reasons, have no family support in Israel. They are called *חייל בודד* - “Lone Soldiers.”

In the summer of 2006, Michael came to the US for a family wedding. Two weeks into his visit, Hezbollah terrorists from Lebanon ambushed an IDF patrol on Israel’s northern border, killing 5 and kidnapping 2. When Israeli soldiers attempted to rescue their comrades, Hezbollah attacked the State of Israel with thousands of rockets and Israel prepared an assault to halt their launch and destroy Hezbollah’s capability.

Michael cut short his leave and flew back to Israel to rejoin his unit. The army told him he was not required to return, but Michael would not be dissuaded. When he arrived, the army tried to station him separately from his unit. It is the IDF’s custom to keep Lone Soldiers away from the front. But Michael pleaded and eventually received permission to join his comrades stationed in the North. Michael’s unit was sent into the Hezbollah village of *Aita al-Shaab* where the two kidnapped soldiers had been taken two weeks earlier. They encountered fierce fire from Hezbollah fighters and retreated into an empty store. As reinforcements were approaching, Hezbollah managed to get close enough to fire directly into their hiding place. Three Israeli soldiers were killed that day. One of them was Michael. He was 22 years old.

My family and I arrived in Portland just weeks before Michael Levin was killed. As the war in Lebanon raged, I found myself speaking at a rally at Pioneer Courthouse Square in support of Israel and its right to defend itself from terrorist rockets. I risked, perhaps, my reputation in a town where no one yet knew me. Michael Levin risked everything, and paid with his life. He

died defending the Jewish homeland he loved, our Jewish homeland, even though he had no need or requirement to go. Israel meant that much to him. Michael died a Lone Soldier, but his commitment cast a Giant Shadow.

The *Unetane Tokef* prayer we read tomorrow speaks of human life as a “shattered urn”, and a *צל עובר* a “passing shadow.” But the lives of some are not passing shadows – they cast Giant Shadows.

Last April, I stood at Michael Levin’s grave. I stood with Ida Rae and with an exceptional and diverse group of our Beth Israel congregants, many traveling to Israel for the first time. Most of them are here tonight. We had never met Michael. We had never heard his story. But none of us could help but be moved by the tears of his old friend and mentor Tziki Aud. Michael’s grave is the most decorated one I have ever seen – more than any other one on Mt. Herzl where he had instructed his American parents to have him buried should anything happen to him. The grave was a messy conglomeration of toys, scraps of paper, photographs and those little multi-colored wristbands with slogans on them, so popular with young people. Tziki told us with a grin through the tears, that it looked like the floor of Michael’s perpetually messy room. And, as is the Jewish custom, there were stones. Many, many stones. Seven years earlier at Michael’s funeral, his father was afraid that there would not be a *minyan* present. Their family was shocked to find over 2,000 Israelis present to comfort them. A few years after, a US flag had flown over the Capital building and had flown over this grave before being presented to his grieving parents. A rare recognition in the Israeli military cemetery.

We were there, taking time out of our congregational trip to Israel, at the request of our Beth Israel Sisterhood. One of our Sisters, Daphna Stadig, has a son Richard who himself had been a Lone Soldier in Israel. Our Sisterhood and our travelers had collected much needed items for these fighters – and we all were *shelaychim* – emissaries for the Temple. We carried items like warm socks, hand warmers, ski masks and even candy bars – all things Israeli families normally provide for their kids. We had learned about the Lone Soldier support program and we agreed to help. But we were unprepared for the emotion of the moment.

The man who met us there, Tziki Aud had been a long time employee of the Jewish Agency when he met Michael. Tziki had made it a special project to help take care of Lone Soldiers and he was taken by the always smiling and happy attitude Michael Levin possessed. Michael had talked with Tziki about the dream of a center for Lone Soldiers, a place where they could come to get the support they needed with families far away, or estranged from them. Not only foreign soldiers, Tziki explained to us, but many Israelis who come from the Ultra-Orthodox find themselves rejected by their families for fighting in the Israeli army. Many of them come without basic math and Hebrew skills because of yeshiva training that eschewed those subjects. In 2009, three years after his death, the [Lone Soldier Center in Memory of Michael Levin](#) was

established and to this day helps to take care of these young men and women who risk their lives for the State of Israel without close-by family support.

Right now, in Israel, two of my former students – one from New Rochelle and one from here in our congregation - are Lone Soldiers. A third from another Portland synagogue has just arrived. Our group even had Shabbat dinner with our Temple boy, Josh Ingber, during our visit. I follow their training and deployment on Facebook. I read almost daily about their gripes and their joys. I see their pride as they find their place fighting for the land of Israel. I remember them in my classroom as we discussed Jewish moral perspectives on a wide range of issues. I see their faces as bright teens. And I worry for them.

Israel has always been in a precarious situation. Our Jewish homeland is located in one of the most dangerous regions of the world. An area where faith and politics and absolutism abound, where Western values of tolerance, democracy and respect for diversity – all the values Israel stands for - are not the norm. But it has never been as volatile a region as it is now. The Arab Spring has thrown off many oppressive Western-backed regimes which offered stability but often brutally repressed their own people. Having that top down pressure suddenly removed has created explosive opportunities for the worst elements of Jihadist and Anti-Western sentiment. The brutal civil war in Syria has raged into a third year with horrific loss of life and unprecedented displacement of refugees, over two million now, flooding Jordan and Lebanon.

This past week has seen the most remarkable turn of events in America's relationship to this chaos. The use of Chemical Weapons by the Assad regime has rightly drawn the world's focus, if not sufficiently its ire. Weapons, the use of which has been banned globally after the horrors of World War I, were used to slaughter over a thousand civilians, perhaps a third of them children – suffocated in their beds. Their deaths are no more tragic than the 100,000 or more throughout Syria – but the despicable use of nerve gas which destroys widely, indiscriminately and is useful primarily against unprotected civilians – who wind up choking and gasping for breath through their burned lungs - is uniquely horrific and has been rejected by the world. It cannot go unpunished.

Since before the start of Rosh Hashanah I have been very actively communicating with the members of Congress in our region. It has not been an ideal time to do so – let me tell you. Nor for them. But I am very appreciative of how generous each one has been with their time. I am very appreciative of how thoughtful each has been as they have struggled with this mighty task. I particularly want to thank Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley and Representatives Suzanne Bonamici and Earl Blumenauer who were kind enough to engage with me in multiple conversations. We did not always agree, but I hope that my rabbinic perspective was a bit helpful in their deliberations. I certainly learned from each of them.

I entered into these conversations not because I have any expertise in international affairs. I don't. But I am deeply worried. I am worried for these boys of mine who are fighting in the

Israeli army. I am worried for other students of mine, from this congregation, who are right now serving in the American military. I am worried for civilians in Israel, in America and around the world. When the use of weapons of mass destruction, Chemical, Biological, Radiological, are openly used and the world does not stand up to them – we are all in greater danger than we were before. If other nations such as North Korea or Iran see that there are no limits on not just acquiring these fearful weapons, but in using them on unarmed civilians, I worry for us all. If Syria feels free to share their chemical weapons with their allies in Hezbollah – the danger to Israeli soldiers and citizens is greatly expanded. Rockets raining down on Israel's North, filled with deadly nerve agents like Sarin and VX could become a horrific reality. And though I am not one to paint or even picture nightmare scenarios, I know the idea of these chemical weapons being used on American soil keeps people responsible for our defense up at night.

And we Jews, we who know the horrors of deadly gas being used to efficiently exterminate human beings like insects; our own family! – we are especially sensitive to the reintroduction of such despicable weapons into the world's brutal arsenal. We cannot stand idly by.

The landscape is changing quickly. Just over a week ago it seemed certain that American cruise missiles would strike. Then we found ourselves in an intense national conversation on whether Congress should or should not give the Commander in Chief the legal authority to strike. Suddenly, as the vote was approaching, a new initiative presented by Syria's Russian enablers seemed to point the way to a diplomatic solution – one that, if true, would provide the best possible solution: the total capture and disposal of all of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. Now, after the President has addressed the nation and withdrawn the request for authorization from Congress, new doubts about the seriousness of this proposal and the ability of the international community to even implement the plan have arisen. Secretary Kerry has just spent two days in Geneva; returning, I hope, in time for Yom Kippur services. Then he flies to Jerusalem on Sunday to consult with the Israelis. The days ahead are fraught with danger and we could find ourselves right back where we were, with the only difference being that Assad has had more time to hide his weapons from American view. But it is a chance I am pleased we took. As the Torah teaches:

כִּי־תִקְרַב אֶל־עִיר לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ וְקִרְאתָ אֵלֶיהָ לְשָׁלוֹם:

*When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it,  
then proclaim peace unto it. (Deut. 20:10)*

First make the conditions of peace known, so there is a chance for the enemy to comply. And so we did - and so, perhaps, there is a peaceful path. Just yesterday, Syria announced that it has begun the process of joining the chemical weapons treaty. A very positive step. Today, Assad seems to have put more conditions on that step. No matter what, there must be consequences and the world must know that anyone who uses such horrific weapons will pay a price.

I also believe that the President needs to have the credible threat of military action behind him to keep the Syrians and Russians on task. This is too important to allow the world's attention to wane and for dictators to know that if they only find a way to delay action, America will not follow through.

We are just a few days now after September 11. Twelve years ago a certain innocence was lost in America, as we saw our vulnerability. Terrorism was on our doorstep. The slaughter of 3,000 Americans simply going about the daily lives has shaken us to this day. We cannot live with innocence any longer or pretend that the events on the other side of the world do not affect us. We have a stake in insuring that those who would regard the lives of innocents with contempt do not have access to the most horrible weapons.

This vulnerability is something Israel has understood throughout its existence. Although it is strong, just as America is strong; although it is confident, just as America is confident; Israel is vulnerable. It is important that America stand strong for itself, for its leadership in the world and to assure its most important allies in the region, Turkey, Jordan and Israel, that America means what it says.

As I stood at the grave of Michael Levin last Spring, I reflected on what it means to sacrifice for what you believe in. I reflected on the life of another Lone Solider – perhaps the first in Israeli history: David “Mickey” Marcus, the United States Army Colonel who assisted Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Marcus, who was born on Hester Street in Manhattan's Lower East Side, who in the 1930's as an Assistant US Attorney in New York prosecuted gangsters such as Lucky Luciano. Marcus who had helped to clean out the Nazi concentration camps and later worked intimately on the Nuremberg trials. Marcus, who capped his honorable military career by volunteering as a military advisor for the emerging Jewish army in Israel – the *Haganah*. Marcus, who as commander of the Jerusalem front in May 1948, was the builder of the so-called “Burma Road” which helped keep supplies flowing to the besieged city – a road we hiked this Spring. David “Mickey” Marcus who became the first Jewish officer in nearly 2000 years to be given the Hebrew rank of *Aluf* or General.

The story of Marcus' remarkable accomplishments are told in the movie “Cast a Giant Shadow” where the General was played by Kirk Douglas. David “Mickey” Marcus was killed accidentally by friendly fire just hours before the United Nations cease fire went into effect. But Marcus did cast a Giant Shadow. He is buried at West Point, the only American buried there who was killed fighting under the flag of a foreign country. But it was not his death that made his actions great. It was his commitment. His dedication to a new Jewish Homeland, to protecting its right to exist – and in time to live in peace with its neighbors. He did not have to be a Lone Solider – but he knew there was no one else to take his place. The Giant Shadow cast by Marcus continues to be cast by Michael Levin. It is cast by the boys of my Confirmation classes serving in the Israeli army today, by the thousands of Lone Soldiers who are their comrades in Arms. They cast a

Giant Shadow which shields those who are vulnerable. America is also able to cast that Giant Shadow – and it does. There is greatness, there is commitment: to human rights and the value of human life. We cast a Giant Shadow when we know that our strength does give us responsibilities and that we can uphold visions of safety, respect and peace. Sometimes we stand alone. But like these young Lone Soldiers, America stands on commitment and dedication. May this great nation, may this great people, always have the confidence to Cast a Giant Shadow.