

"Sorrow and Hope" War Memoir

Shimi Talmi*



Shimi Talmi during her military service, Malam Archives

Saturday morning, Yom Kippur, October 1973, I get called back to my unit. I'm doing my compulsory military service in IDF intelligence Unit 848 (later – 8200). The fog of war is pierced by a rumor that turned into the awful truth – the Hermon outpost has fallen...

Families begin calling the office and we're helpless, we don't know how to answer, what to answer. Telephone call from the unit commander, Colonel Yoel Ben porat – I go to his office. "This is a list of the soldiers in the outpost and their addresses," he says, handing me a sheet of paper. "I'm giving you a car and a driver, go visit the families."

"What should I say to them?" I ask. He's silent for a minute, and then he says, "Give them encouragement..."



Colonel Yoel Ben porat, Wikipedia

Something to hold onto...

I already know how to fill out "Form 55", which is a request for reassignment; I know it's my job to send packages of candy and cookies to lone soldiers. I don't know what to tell parents who are anxious about the fate of their children. My heart pounds and I shiver despite the heat in the Israeli-made, fiberglass, non-air-conditioned car. But it's the order of the day, of the hour. The gods of war opened a new front and somehow, I got sent there to report for duty. My driver takes me from Mevaseret Zion, just northwest of Jerusalem to Rosh Pina in the north; from Netivot in the south to Safed in the north; from pain to anxiety; from desperation to hope.

I still remember the first door. I stand there for a long time, my heart hammering in my chest, my hand knocking faintly at the door. I go inside and the questions fall like rain, as though I have answers.

The families are hungry for every scrap of information, a bit of light to dispel the darkness of the unknown. They want something to hold onto, a life preserver, something to bring them hope.

All I had was a list of the names and addresses of the soldiers stationed at the outpost, and a driver and an overheated car, to cry in as we drove back to base.

I still have the notebook I wrote the names and addresses in:

Private first-class Asher, Gimmel neighborhood, apartment house entrance 407, Tiberias. Single-parent family, no father, mother and sister despondent and bitter, mother unable to function, sister takes care of everything.

Ephraim Zinger, serial number 2174824, Tehiya Street 20, Kfar Saba. Parents old, father ill and bed-ridden, mother dealing well with the situation, happy to see me.

Private first-class Gideon Nahum, Gimmel neighborhood, apartment house entrance 25, Tiberias. Family extremely depressed, in denial. They hope for the best. Very difficult visit.

Sergeant Yosef Dani, HaGolan Street 22, Afula Illit. Very large family, another son in the army, tank corps.

Sergeant Moshe Menahem, Kibbutz Maanit.

Haifa, Maoz Tzion, Jerusalem, Nes Tziona, Tel Aviv, Holon. Big families, small families. People who have never met and all of a sudden there is something that unites them, something that sets them apart, and it's stronger than anything.

The people are different, but what they dream about at night and their anxiety by day are so similar.

The random addresses in my notebook become my home, and strangers become members of my family



[Ephraim Zinger, Wikipedia](#)

Eyes full of tears...and no answer

On my list of soldiers posted to the Hermon outpost is **Alfred Axelrod**, only child, parents Julius and Emilia, old, Holocaust survivors, alone in a foreign country which is now their home.

Officers who went to visit say they won't open the door. I approach the house and a woman, Alfred's mother, peeks out of the window, sees me and rushes to lock the door. I go back again, this time not in uniform, and Emilia opens the door. She looks at me, her eyes enormous and asks only one question: "Why did you send him there?"

I look back at her, my eyes full of tears, I take her hand and I am silent, there is nothing I can say.



Sargeant Alfred (Freddie) Axelrod

Yizkor - The Commemoration Site of Fallen Defense and Security Forces of Israel

One day, "*The Syria Times*" publishes pictures of the Israeli POWs and we gather around it, trying to identify them. I hurry to the families, clutching the pictures as though they had come from a lost treasure chest, and go from one house to the next to give them hope that their child is still alive.

"Shimi, that's Yizhar, Shimi, that's Avi, that's Ephraim." I share their joy and my happiness knows no bounds, and only when I'm back in our "Susita" car, do I notice that several families have identified the same picture as their son. Should I tell them they were wrong? Plant seeds of doubt? I decide to say nothing, not to rob them of the only thing they have left: hope.



Dr. Henry Kissinger, Wikipedia

Somewhat later **Henry Kissinger** came with a list of the POWs. They were all there, all the names were there, all the soldiers who had been stationed on the Hermon Mountain. All of them, except Emilia and Julius' son, Freddy, wasn't on the list.

A short time before I finished my army service the unit commander, Yoel, called me. "You know the families, go to the airport with me, the soldiers are coming home." Such incredible joy! My heart pounded again as it had so many months ago, but I smiled through my tears, my fear turned into joy and all the sleepless nights were turned into a dream come true.

The son who didn't come home

The following day everyone went to celebrate with the families and the returning soldiers. I went to Julius and Emilia and we cried with the happiness of those who had returned. We cried for their son, who had not returned, their only son, their beloved son.

Parents who didn't take their son – and he went.

Parents who didn't send their only son to scale the mountain – and he scaled it.

Parents who did not bind the son, their beloved son, for sacrifice – but the fire of the altar also burned the bush.

Afterwards, like many others in the unit and the IDF, I kept in contact with the family, and on Memorial Days we would meet at their home in Moshav Kadima and together mourn the loss of their son. Eventually, Julius and Emilia passed away.

On the Jewish New Year in 2002 we went to visit Emilia on her deathbed as she counted her final days. We were a large family there, officers of the wounded who served after that war, generations of women sergeants who had served as IDF case workers, commanders and other friends who had met Emilia, become close and accompanied her throughout the years.

Looking at her I have flashbacks, images of our first meeting come flooding back. I can see her in my mind's eye, a picture of Jewish sorrow, searching for consolation and reassurance, and I, a tiny representative of a great hope, who hadn't known how to protect what was most important to her in the whole world.

We know how to praise our heroes, we know how to mourn our fallen, but we refuse to live with those who fail us.

And far from there, at the opposite emotional pole, is **Amos Levinberg**, who was not strong enough to withstand the enemy, whose will collapsed and who revealed military secrets, incurring the wrath of his commanders and his comrades in captivity. A wrath that accompanies us to this day and which time has not dulled...

We know how to praise our heroes, we know how to mourn our fallen, but we refuse to live with those who fail us. I remained in contact with Amos. This past year his image gave me no peace.



[Amos Levinberg, Facebook](#)

Will we find the strength to have mercy and return the lost son to the fold? How long will we make him bear the failure, which to a great extent is ours as well, and keep him distant?

Yom Kippur 2022, Amos called me. We always called one another on Yom Kippur and Memorial Day. "Shimi," he said, "I have something good to tell you. Today I met with officers of Unit 8200, I was summoned by the unit commander. I was very emotional, so were they..."



Shimi Talmi during her military service, Malam Archives

God has pity on kindergarten children,
He pities school children -- less.
But adults he pities not at all.
He abandons them,
And sometimes they have to crawl on all fours
In the scorching sand
To reach the dressing station,
Streaming with blood. (Yehuda Amichai)

The cycles of the world expand and retract, and I know, deep, deep, inside my heart, that where cycles of blame and pain are blurred, there the cycles of hope and life expand and open.

January 2023 – Blessed is he who believes.