**Commemorating the Yom Kippur War: The Legacy of Rav Yehuda Amital**

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[](http://www.ou.org/life/files/p.17-6-c.jpg)Rav Amital with his student Asher Yaron at the door to the beit midrash. Yaron fell in battle on the second day of the Yom Kippur War.

(Excerpted from “By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital” by Elyashiv Reichner (translated by Elli Fischer. Maggid Books, 2011).

*It says in Psalms (145:18): “God is near to all those who call Him – to all who call Him in truth.” Anyone who truly calls, whether religious or not. Neither I, as a Rosh Yeshiva, nor my students and friends, your comrades-at-arms, represent God any more than you do. Whose prayer comes nearer to God – the prayer of someone like me who was trained in it from childhood, or your prayer, which you discovered in the heat of battle? Only God knows…a sincere prayer that originates in the depths and flows forth from there, even if the words are stammered, is heard at the highest heights. King David wrote in one of his psalms (ibid.130:2), “God! Listen in to my voice (HaShem shema be-koli); may Your ears be attentive to the sound of my supplication.” A great Hasidic master once pointed out that it does not say “listen to my voice (shema koli),” rather “listen in to my voice (shema be-koli)” – listen to what is hidden within the notes of my voice, what I could not articulate in words.*  
Speech to Yom Kippur War combat soldiers,  
HaMa’alot MiMa’amakim, 5734 (1973)

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The 5734 (1973–74) academic year, the sixth year of Yeshivat Har Etzion, began normally. More than two-hundred students were studying in the yeshiva that year, and it had become one of the most outstanding and popular Zionist yeshivot. On the eve of Yom Kippur, Rav Amital delivered a discourse, as he did every year, on a theme of the day. He cited the prophecy of Yeĥezkel (33:1–3), which warns the people of impending war if they do not repent:

*Son of man, speak to your countrymen and say to them: When I bring the sword against a land, the people of that land take one of their number and appoint him their watchman, so he sees the sword advancing on the land, and he blows the shofar to warn the people.*

Later in that chapter (v. 11), a well-known verse appears: *“Say to them: As I live – declares the Lord God – I do not desire the death of the wicked, but the wicked man’s turning from his ways. Turn back! Turn back from your wicked ways! Why should you die, O House of Israel?”*

Some of the students saw this, in retrospect, as a foreshadowing of what happened the next day.

War broke out on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. Many students were called to report to their units even before the fast ended, and they went to take leave of the Rashei Yeshiva. They left the yeshiva’s minyan and convened their own, completing Ne’ila early. They were led in their prayers by Moshe Tal, a fourth-year student and a newlywed, having been married less than two months earlier. At the yeshiva’s main minyan, Rav Amital gave an emotional speech before Ne’ila. He quoted the Rambam’s Hilkhot Melakhim (7:15) regarding one going out to battle:

Once he enters the heat of battle, he should rely on the Hope and Rescuer of Israel in its time of distress. He should know that he is doing battle for God’s sake, and he should place his life in his hand. He should not be afraid or scared; he should not think of his wife or children, but rather should erase their memory from his heart, and turn his attention from everything else to war.

These words made a profound impression on the students.  
Right after the end of the holy day, R. Yoel Bin-Nun, then Alon Shvut’s security coordinator, among other things, urged the students not to wait for their orders, but to report to their units independently. He even shared with the students his assessment that the Bar-Lev line, the string of fortifications along the Suez Canal, had already fallen – and was reprimanded by Rav Amital, who expressed faith in the IDF’s steadfast durability. On the other hand, Rav Amital was not euphoric, either. When one of the students proposed reading the Song of the Sea, which expresses gratitude to God for His miracles, Rav Amital rejected the idea, saying: “Slow down. First let’s hear what’s happening.”  
The yeshiva – which was about to break for Sukkot anyway – was emptied of students, and Rav Amital went home to Jerusalem. It was not long before terrible tidings began to arrive, one after the other.

During the first twenty days of the war, Yeshivat Har Etzion lost eight of its students…  
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In most cases, Rav Amital heard about the loss of the student immediately, sometimes even before the parents. The tidings wounded him deeply, but outwardly he kept conveying optimism. One external sign attested somewhat to what was going on in his soul: after quitting for several years, he started smoking again during the first days of the war. It was a long time before he quit smoking again. A student who was a guest in Rav Amital’s house that Sukkot experienced more evidence of what Rav Amital was going through. One night, as they slept in the sukka, he heard Rav Amital moaning in grief, heartrending moans that reminded him of the whimper of the shofar. Yoel Amital, who was called up on Simĥat Torah, later asked his father how he felt and what he had to say about the loss of his eight students. Rav Amital sorrowfully answered his son: “What did the Alter of Slabodka say after the events of 1929, when so many of his students from Yeshivat Ĥevron were killed? He cried.”

In addition to the eight students who fell, several yeshiva students were wounded in the war, some of them severely. Meeting them was also traumatic for Rav Amital. Yehuda Schwartz, a member of the first class, was very critically wounded on the Golan Heights the day after Yom Kippur. Five days after being wounded, Rav Amital and Yedaya Hacohen went to visit him at Rambam Hospital in Haifa. Schwartz recalls:

*Rav Amital didn’t recognize me. I was completely bandaged and the prognosis was very bleak. He knew it was me only because he saw my wife sitting next to me. I couldn’t see the Rav because my eyes were covered, but they told me that he was worried by what he saw. Some say that he started smoking again because of that visit with me. The next time he came to visit, my legs were covered by a device designed to keep the sheets away from the burns on my body. Rav Amital saw the device and became very alarmed. He thought that something terrible had happened to my legs and immediately lifted the sheets to see that everything was okay. The first day that I was able to put on tefillin, I called him to tell him the news. I could feel him crying into the phone.*

Immediately after Sukkot, Rav Amital informed Rav Lichtenstein that he was incapable of functioning as a Rosh Yeshiva for the time being, handing over all authority. Once ĥoref zeman (winter session) began on the first of Ĥeshvan, Rav Amital barely visited the yeshiva. Instead he traveled frequently to the front, to visit his students. The few students who remained studying in the yeshiva characterized Rav Amital during that period as the yeshiva’s ‘foreign minister’.

In his travels to the front, Rav Amital found some healing for his wounded soul. Wherever he went he encouraged his students, but he also drew strength from them. Once, on a radio show, he recounted the experience of his first encounter with his combat-soldier students, during a lull between battles:

*We came to them as Rashei Yeshiva, but there were moments that we were cut down to size in their presence, and we stood like students before their masters, awestruck by their greatness… we stood dumbfounded in the presence of students who, a few days earlier, were engaged in resolving the Talmudic debates of Abaye and Rava and clarifying Talmudic discussions, and now they were waging war with all their heart and soul, believing that they were indeed fighting God’s wars and that God was fighting for them. I would not be exaggerating if I said that we felt that we were breathing the air of the Tanakh.*

The students also experienced something special when Rav Amital came to visit them on the front, during battles. R. Hillel Raĥmani, a member of the yeshiva’s third class who was then fighting on the Golan Heights, describes the meeting with Rav Amital as a spiritual experience:

Right after Sukkot, he came with several other rabbis. We gathered in the synagogue and Rav Amital asked to speak last. When he got up to speak, everyone felt like he was going to prophesy, not merely speak. I have no idea what he spoke about. I don’t remember a single word. But it was truly prophetic. He spoke with all his heart. I think that just a few minutes earlier he was informed that Rafi and Avner fell, and he was caught up in an extraordinary storm of emotions. He spoke about the war, about vision, about the Jewish people. Silence descended on the whole crowd. This was not just another speech by a Rosh Yeshiva, but something much more…

During the cease-fire, the nature of Rav Amital’s visits to his students changed. The students, and many other soldiers, even those who were not religious, wanted to hear words of spiritual encouragement from him and from other rabbis who came to visit. “It turned out,” Rav Amital recounted, “that when it comes to thirsting for God’s word, the differences between soldiers who are yeshiva students and other soldiers, religious and non-religious, become somewhat blurred.” He began shuttling from unit to unit to meet combat soldiers, to hear their experiences, and to strengthen them with words of encouragement. When he returned from his visits to the front, he would encourage the soldiers’ families in the home front. R. Ya’akov Fisher, a member of the yeshiva’s third class who fought on the Northern Front against the Syrians, got married dur- ing the months of the war. About a week before the wedding, Rav Amital came to visit his unit. “He understood that there was no chance that I would be released to go home for my aufruf on the Shabbat before the wedding, so he lifted my spirits. When he got home, he called Tzippy, my fiancée. Instead of telling her that I would not be home for Shabbat, he said, ‘Don’t worry. The equipment compartments of the tanks are filled with candy. The guys will make him a great aufruf. It’ll be fine.’”  
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The harsh result of the war impacted Rav Amital on the personal level, but his spiritual worldview was not altered, at least not for the first few years …

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Two years after the Yom Kippur War, in November 1975, Rav Amital lost two other students. Bentzi Leibowitz and Naĥum Fenigstein, members of the yeshiva’s seventh class, were traveling to spend Shabbat with friends at Yeshivat HaGolan in Hispin and were killed in a terrorist attack. A month after their deaths, the yeshiva held a memorial service for the pair. As he walked into his home after the ceremony, the tele- phone rang with more terrible news: during a security drill held by the yeshiva after the ceremony, Yitzĥak Lavi, a member of the yeshiva’s fifth class, was accidentally shot and killed. Just seven years after its founding, the yeshiva had already buried eleven students.

The deaths of his students etched themselves deep in Rav Amital’s heart and affected his personality. On the thirtieth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, speaking at a memorial service on Mount Herzl, Rav Amital described the deep impression that the fallen left on him:

*At the memorial service held for the yeshiva’s fallen, I made a supreme effort to characterize each and every one of them. It wasn’t simple. I labored hours upon hours to know and remember all of them. I tried, and I was more or less successful. The families can tell you. But I want to tell you: I internalized everything. It became part of my personality. They live inside me. God, Knower of thoughts, Examiner of hearts, knows that there are elements of my personality that I internalized from what I remembered of them. I have been passing them onward for thirty years now, and so these elements yet live. In this respect, they are my teachers. My personality has been enriched.*

There is a small measure of comfort, he continued, in the fact that the fallen have become part of the personalities of those who knew them:

*Fifty years ago, I knew an old man, a Holocaust survivor, in Reĥovot. He came to me and begged me to procure a tape recorder for him. “Why do you need a tape recorder?” I asked him. He replied, “I’m the only one who remembers a certain tune for Tefilat Tal, the Prayer for Dew. If I pass on, nobody will know the tune.” The tune is still playing. Don’t take it lightly. As someone who passed through the abyss of the Holocaust, I say to you: Tens of thousands of people perished together with their memories…Those who fell in the Yom Kippur War left a book of memories that is occasionally opened. They live on within us, and we pass on everything we learned from them.*

*To read more about the legacy of Rabbi Yehuda Amital, see*By Faith Alone*, available at*[*www.korenpub.com*](http://korenpub.com/EN/index.php)*.*