NEILA 5785 SPEECH: The Final Verdict

It is the end of Yom Kippur, the moment of the Neila prayer. In the heavens, the Trial is about to begin. The Almighty is seated on His throne, ready to judge His people, Israel, and deliver His final verdict. In the center of the Heavenly Court is the scale that weighs Israel's merits (zekhuyot) and transgressions (chobot). The final result will determine if the upcoming year will be good or difficult for Israel. There is much at stake. This coming year 5785 is a decisive one for the future of the Jewish people.

A tense silence is felt both in the heavens and on earth.

First, permission is granted to the prosecutor to present his arguments. He rises and begins loading the left side of the scale with the transgressions that the people of Israel committed in the past year. Sin after sin, he piles up offenses, both small and great, onto the scale. When he finishes, he steps aside. The scale is very heavy; it tips dramatically to the left, and an uncomfortable silence fills the air of the Court.

Next, permission is granted to the angels Michael, Elijahu, and Gabriel, the defenders of Israel, to present Israel's merits from the past year.

The angels call seven witnesses, Seven Jewish Patriarchs, to the stand to testify and present their case before the Almighty.

First, Abraham arrives, representing chesed (kindness). Abraham steps forward and reminds everyone that the past year was a year of war, imposed on us from Simchat Torah. The first patriarch brings with him all the acts of kindness performed by the people of Israel, who rose to the occasion: the doctors

and nurses in hospitals who spent sleepless nights saving the lives of wounded soldiers; the security personnel who risk their lives to prevent attacks in civilian centers; the psychologists, social workers, teachers, and youth counselors who attend to grieving families suffering the worst losses. He then introduces the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who showed up during the war. The women of Nahariya who dropped everything to cook for months so that soldiers always had the best food available. And the hundreds of men who became volunteer drivers, transporting soldiers and reservists day and night. The volunteers who organized barbecues and delicious meals for the fighters returning from Gaza. The thousands of israelis who attended the funeral of loved ones, friends, or lonely soldiers that never met before their burial. And those who supported wounded soldiers, visiting, accompanying, and singing for them. The ZAKA volunteers who, from scenes of unimaginable horror, recovered the last remnants of Jewish bodies that had been deliberately burned and mutilated. The solidarity of Jews in the diaspora who rose to the occasion, gathering and sending dozens of planes loaded with tons of equipment and clothing for the army. Those who organized and participated in solidarity trips. Those who donated and raised millions of dollars to the State of Israel and its army.

Next, Isaac, the *olah temimah* , the young man willing to sacrifice himself for Kiddush Hashem (the sanctification of God’s name), presents his case. Isaac places on the right side of the scale the 750 pure souls of Jewish soldiers and fighters who fell in combat since October 7. The soldiers who, on that fateful day, died defending their military bases with their last bullets, or those like Elhanan Kalmenzon, who came from the other side of Israel, from Judea and Samaria, to Kibbutz Be’eri upon hearing the news of the attack that morning, not waiting for orders, but acting to save Jewish lives at the cost of his own life. And the young soldiers who, in the bloody battles of Gaza, volunteered to go to the front

and enter those houses filled with explosives. And the brave fighters who threw themselves onto live grenades to save their brothers in arms. And those fighters like Commander Arnon Zamora, who gave his life to rescue four hostages from Hamas. And the paramedics who ran through a hail of bullets to bring home their wounded comrades, or their bodies, from the battlefield. The scale begins to tilt heavily to the right.

Isaac steps aside, and then Jacob arrives, the patriarch who fought the angel of Esau and prevailed, though he was injured for life. Jacob brings with him the names of the 11,000 Israeli soldiers wounded since October 7. He places on the scale the wheelchairs, crutches, prosthetics, tears, and scars of their pain. He then piles on the physical or mental disabilities these young heroes will carry for life.

The weight on the right side is already unbearable.

Next comes Yosef and reminds everyone that he was a captive, thrown into a pit full of scorpions and snakes and later was imprisoned for two years, thinking he would never leave alive. Yosef brings the names of the 101 captives still held in Gaza: young women, men, and children who survive in dark tunnels or are hidden in damp apartments. Hungry, exhausted, abused, physically and emotionally tortured, desperate for rescue, praying for a miraculous salvation like Yosef’s.

At this moment, everyone steps back, and Moses, our teacher, enters the Court, carrying the Tora that bears his name. He shows that since October 7, Tora study and observance have revived like never before in Jewish history. He places on the right side of the scale hundreds of new Torah scrolls dedicated all over the world to the memory of fallen soldiers. He presents hundreds of thousands of Tefillin and Tzitzit worn by every Jewish soldier in battle. And the millions of Tehillim books they carry in their pockets. And the improvised synagogues in Gaza, and the new Sukkot in southern Lebanon, ready to celebrate the holiday. He adds the incredible

resurgence of Judaism in the diaspora, in America, placing a recent picture of billionaire Bill Ackman who, less than a week ago, put on Tefillin for the first time in his life.

Moses introduces his brother, Aharon HaCohen, who taught us to be united and practice unconditional love among Jews. He places on the scale the solidarity and spirit of unity that Jews rediscovered after October 7. The new awareness that we are more than a people: we are a family. On the battlefield, soldiers discovered that there are no longer Ashkenazim or Sephardim, no left-wing or right-wing—only Jewish brothers fighting shoulder to shoulder, one for the other and all for the people of Israel, *Keish Echad Belev Echad*, like one person with the same heart. He also adds the new understanding that the diaspora communities and the Jews of Israel are one family. Aharon asserts that unity is our greatest strength and the scale tilts even more to the righ, and it is about to break. A tense silence fills the room.

Then trumpets sound, and King David enters the Court: the poet and invincible warrior. David presents the noble generation of young soldiers, some of whom have just finished high school, who pounce on the enemy like lions. They are ready to FIGHT waging war on seven fronts—Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, Iraq, Syria, Judea and Samaria, and, of course, Iran. They are strong, very brave, and determined to defeat a ruthless enemy. They fight to protect our land and restore the glory of the Jewish people. They fight *Bayabasha, Ba'avir, Ubayam*—on land, in the air, and at sea—to eliminate Amaleq and proclaim: "Am Yisrael Chai!"

King David finishes his testimony, and suddenly, the doors swing open, and they burst into the Court. Footsteps are heard outside, and everyone stands as the four matriarchs of our nation enter. Sarah, Ribka , Rachel, and Leah approach the scale and place on the plate the names of the 750 mothers, Imaot Shekulot, who have lost a son in the war and whose cries of pain will never cease. And the hundreds of young widows who

must now raise their three, four, or five children alone, without their beloved husbands by their side. And the prayers and tears of Jewish mothers who pray for their sons in the war. And the endless chapters of Tehillim they recite by the beds of their wounded sons in hospitals. The prayers of the women of the *yishuvim* (settlements) in Judea and Samaria, whose husbands are in the *miluim* reserves military service in Gaza for three, four, or five months. And who will be called again soon to fight in Lebanon. They pray at night when their children are asleep, begging God not to become widows, or during the day, while tending to their kids, pretending everything is fine so their families remain normal and not traumatized by the events of October 7.

The right plate of the scale now collapses under the weight of the virtues, merits, and prayers of the people of Israel.

Michael, Elijah, and Gabriel rest their case.

The Almighty seals the verdict for the Jewish people and declares that Israel has suffered more than what it deserves, and receives a heavenly decree that 5785 will be a better year, a year of *yeshu'ot*, victories, and *geulah*, redemption.

What awaits us—and what we truly deserve—is the best year yet to come in our extraordinary history.

Shanah Toba,

Rabbi Yosef Bitton