SUKKOT 5785 SPEECH: Shemuel Yosef and Shimon Bar Kochba

Two Documents, 1,900 Years Apart

This is the story of two historical documents: a letter written 1,900 years ago, and a video of a phone conversation I received a week ago in my family chat. The young man speaking in the video had never heard of the ancient letter. Still, remarkably, both documents carry the same message: the unwavering will of the Jewish people to fight for their land, and their dedication to the precepts of the Torah in the most critical moments.

Let’s start with the video. One of my wife’s younger sisters lost her husband to cancer about 20 years ago, when their youngest son was only three years old.

She lives in Ashdod and has four sons and a daughter. The oldest served in the army and now handles security (Bitachon) in his settlement, very close to Sderot. The second served in an intelligence unit of the Israel Defense Forces. The third, 30 years old, is currently serving as a reservist (Miluim) at Zikim, a military base near Gaza. It is a warehouse (machsan) that runs the army’s supply chain of ammunition, food, clothing, and other necessities.

The youngest son is fighting in Gaza alongside the troops in Jabalia, a Palestinian city in the north of the Strip. Israel plans to evacuate civilians from northern Gaza, about one-third of the Strip, and turn it into a closed military zone under Israeli control. About 200,000 Palestinians remain in that area, and terrorists hide among the civilians and prepare ambushes against Israeli soldiers from there. Israel is making significant efforts to clear the area of terrorists. Unfortunately, several Israeli soldiers have been killed in

Jabalia, including the Druze colonel Ahsan Daqsa, commander of the 401st Brigade, the highest-ranking officer to fall since the beginning of the war, who died today, October 20, in a tragic explosion.

My nephew is a very young soldier. His face still has the innocence and purity of a child, which even the harsh army life has not managed to change. He wears a large white knitted kippah, and long pe’ot peek out from under his green helmet.

A few days ago, I received a video in the family chat. In it, his older brother, the reservist, is talking on the phone with him. I cannot share the video for security reasons, but I will share part of the conversation.

First, the older brother identifies himself by his combat name. Then he says something like: “Right now I’m taking care of getting lulavim and etrogim for you and your battalion. I want to make sure you subdue the enemy, so shake them in all directions, but especially toward the heavens (kivune shamayim).” Then, more casually, he asks, “How are you?”

“Barukh HaShem,” the young soldier replies. “Today I spoke with our oldest brother. He said he would bring some lulavim to Mom in Ashdod.”

“Yes, I know. He was here in Zikim, and we brought some sets here too.”

When I saw this video, it gave me chills. Why? Because my mind traveled 1,900 years into the past.

The last time the people of Israel had an army, before the establishment of the State of Israel, was around the year 130 of the common era, in the days of Bar Kochba. Since the destruction of the Bet HaMikdash in 68, the Romans had ruled the land of Israel, and Jerusalem was in ruins. In 117, Emperor Hadrian came to power, obsessed with ending the Jewish people, and he gradually restricted religious practice. He

first banned Berit Milah (circumcision) under penalty of death, then outlawed the observance of Shabbat, and later the study of the Torah. Around the year 129, unhappy that Jews kept observing the Torah in secret at the risk of their lives, he planned his greatest provocation: an idolatrous temple in Jerusalem dedicated to the Roman god Jupiter.

At that moment, a brave Jewish leader named Shimon Bar Kochba decided they could not stand idly by. He organized a revolt against the powerful Roman Tenth Legion to regain their national and religious freedom. Miraculously, Bar Kochba's makeshift army succeeded and destroyed the mighty Roman legion. They recaptured Jerusalem and even minted coins that read, "Year One of the Liberation of Jerusalem." These coins were minted for three years, which means that during that time the Jews regained their religious independence.

Then the unexpected happened. Hadrian's hatred of the Jews was so great that he brought his entire army, the most powerful in the world, to fight them. His troops came from Britain, Gaul (France), and Germania (Germany). This reminds me of what Hitler did in 1944: while losing to Russia, he diverted resources to deport 500,000 Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz, at the expense of the Russian front.

After a heroic struggle that lasted years, Bar Kochba's army was defeated. Many historians believe that despite the military defeat, Bar Kochba triumphed. Thanks to his struggle, a pagan temple was never built in the holy city, which would have been the greatest possible affront and humiliation to the ruins of the Bet HaMikdash.

Bar Kochba was not only a military leader who fought Israel's enemies. He also guided the people of Israel to fulfill the mitzvot and embrace the Torah.

A few decades ago, the famous Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin discovered, in the caves of the Judean desert, a letter

written on behalf of Shimon Bar Kochba himself. In it, the Jewish leader writes to one of his fighters to request some essential supplies:

“From Shimon to Yehuda: … I am sending you two donkeys and two men. Take them to Yehonatan bar Masabla … and have him load the donkeys with palm branches [lulavim] and etrogim and send them back. He should also send other men to bring myrtle branches [hadasim] and willow branches [aravot] to our camp. Make sure the tithe (ma’aser) has been separated. Send everything to the camp, [because we need a large number of lulavim, as] our army is very large. Shalom.”

In the video and in Bar Kochba’s letter, we see the same pattern. In the middle of a war, a general or a soldier of the Jewish army steps away for a moment from critical military matters to attend to something more urgent: making sure the fighters have lulavim and etrogim to celebrate Sukkot.

Because both in the days of Bar Kochba and today in Gaza or Lebanon, what is at stake is not just a military operation to reclaim territory or defeat the enemy. It is the unwavering will to remain Jewish, to observe our Torah, and to keep our connection to God and to the land He gave us.

Chag Sameach.

First, Rafael identifies himself by his combat name and then says something like: “Right now, I’m taking care of getting the lulavim and etrogim for you and your battalion. I want to make sure you subdue the enemy, so aim (your prayers or the lulav movements) in all directions, but especially towards the heavens (kivune shamayim).” Then, more informally, Rafael asks, “How are you?”,” Baruch Hashem,“ replies Shmuel Yosef, “Today I spoke with Shimon. He said he would bring some lulavim to [mom in] Ashdod.“. ” Yes, I know, Shimon was in Zikim, and we brought some sets [of lulavim] here too,“ replies Rafael.

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At that moment, a brave Jewish leader named Shimon Bar Kochba decided they could not stand idly by and organized a revolution against the powerful Roman Tenth Legion to regain their national and religious freedom. Miraculously, Bar Kochba's makeshift army was entirely successful and destroyed the mighty Roman legion. They recaptured Jerusalem and even minted coins that said, "In the first year of the Liberation of Jerusalem." These coins were minted for three years, meaning that during this time, the Jews regained their religious independence.

But then the unexpected happened: Hadrian's hatred of the Jews was so great that he decided to bring his entire army, the most powerful in the world, to fight against the Jews. His troops came from England, Gaul (France), and Germania (Germany). This event reminded me of what Hitler did in 1944, when, losing against Russia, he decided to allocate his military reinforcements to deport 500,000 Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz and abandon the Russian front.

After a heroic struggle that lasted years, Bar Kochba's army was defeated. Many historians consider that despite the military defeat, Bar Kochba triumphed because, thanks to his struggle, a pagan temple was never built in the holy city, which would have been the greatest affront and humiliation possible to the ruins of the Bet HaMikdash.

In addition to being a military leader who fought against Israel's enemies, Bar Kochba guided the people of Israel to fulfill the mitzvot and embrace the Tora.

A few decades ago, the famous Israeli archaeologist Yigal Yadin discovered a letter written in the handwriting of Shimon Bar Kochba himself, found in the caves of the Judean desert. In that letter, the Jewish leader addresses one of his combatants to request some essential supplies.

The letter reads: *"From Shimon [Bar Kochba] to Yehuda: … I am sending two donkeys and two men. Take them to see Yehonatan bar Masabla… and they should ask him to load the donkeys and bring them back with palm branches [lulavim] and etrogim. He should also send other men to bring myrtle branches [hadasim] and willow branches [aravot] to our camp. Make sure the tithe (ma'aser) is already separated. Send everything to my camp. [Remember that we need a large number of lulavim, as] our army is very large. Shalom."*

In Rafael's video and in Bar Kochba's letter, we see the same pattern of behavior. In the midst of war, a general or a soldier of the Jewish army distracts himself momentarily from critical military matters to attend to something more urgent: ensuring that their fighters can have lulavim and etrogim to celebrate the festival of Sukkot.

Because both in the days of Bar Kochba and now in Gaza or Lebanon, what is at stake is not just a military operation to reclaim territory or defeat the enemy, but the unwavering will to remain Jewish, to observe our Tora, our connection to God,

and to the land He granted us.

CHAG SAMEACH.

