

The Yom Kippur War, A Personal Experience by Brenda Yagil

This year, 2023, is a year of memories and commemoration; 80 years since the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in World War II; 75 years since the establishment of the State of Israel and 50 years since Yom Kippur War.

Like many others, I only know about the first two from what I learnt from history, but for me, the Yom Kippur War was very different, very personal as I lived through it in Beersheba with my husband and three young children.

Yom Kippur 1973 Saturday started off normally – very quiet – no traffic, no noise at all. I woke at 6.00 to the sound of a faint siren. My husband said I must have imagined it. There could never be a siren on Yom Kippur. However, we later discovered that there had indeed been a siren at an army base on the other side of the city but because everything was so quiet and it wasn't very far as the crow flies, I heard it.

At about 11.00 I took my restless and bored three-year-old son for a walk. We lived on the outskirts of Beersheba, near the main road leading to Kibbutz Hatzerim and the Hatzerim Air Force Base. As we left home and walked towards the intersection to Hatzerim, I saw cars on the road. Cars on the streets on Yom Kippur – I had never seen such a thing in all the years I had lived in Israel! Unbelievable. As we approached the intersection, I saw many of the cars were stopping to let out men and women in uniform.

Anyone who has ever spent Yom Kippur in Israel knows it is a day like no other, very quiet and peaceful. No noise, no traffic, no buses, no cars, no blaring horns, no shouting – nothing. It is so quiet that even the footsteps of people walking to shul seem loud, but otherwise nothing. Nowadays it is customary for children to ride their bicycles in the car-less streets, but not in 1973! But I saw cars, not only carrying soldiers to the Air Force Base but also continuing to the main army base of the Southern Command which was literally just down the road from our house.

When I returned with my son and while I was telling my husband what I had seen, we suddenly heard another siren and this time it was very loud, right above our heads. It was the most bloodcurdling noise I had ever heard. We lived in a small peaceful cul-de-sac with only 10 houses on either side of the small, leafy street. All our neighbors knew each other. We had shared many good times and bad times over the years. Now we all poured into the street to try and understand what was happening. The Israeli Broadcasting Authority (Kol Israel) had shut down for Yom Kippur which meant no radio, no television. No social media in those days. Nowadays things are very different and even if there are no official broadcasts during Yom Kippur, an emergency crew is always on standby in case of another war or other emergency. But then, we all felt completely cut off from the rest of the world.

One of our neighbors brought out a radio on which we could hear BBC broadcasts which told us repeatedly that Egyptian forces had crossed the Suez Canal into Sinai which was then held by

Israel, but Israel announced they were blocking the attack, but no further details were given. A neighbour brought out a large map of Sinai as we tried to follow the sparse information on the BBC. Someone else brought out a tray of coffee. We stood around chatting, as if we were at a street party and not in a country which was literally fighting for our lives. There was a feeling of fantasy as if it wasn't real.

A young man appeared on a bicycle with orders from the army, telling us to blackout our houses. Nowadays there is no necessity as everything can be seen on satellite from space, but then we had to black out our windows and also the car headlights. Soon after, another young man arrived, also on a bicycle with my husband's call-up papers telling him to report to his mobilization station which was at a nearby school. In those days, the army relied on printed lists of people by neighborhood for mobilization. Every few months my husband would receive a list of people in his unit who lived near us and he would visit them and get them to sign that he knew where they lived and could call on them in an emergency. Today of course all the information is computerized and sent by email or mobile phones and quickly available. So many things have changed in the 50 years since that war.

My husband took his uniform and army pack and went off but returned a short while later, saying that since many men in his unit lived up north, some even as far away as Nahariya, it would take some time for them to reach Beersheba. He suggested that I prepare food for them for when they finally arrived. I used all the food I had prepared to break the fast to make sandwiches. Finally, after breaking his fast, he left again taking all the food with him. When the war finally ended and he returned six months later, he told me that those chopped liver sandwiches were the only food his unit had for the first week of the war. The army, and indeed the entire country, was in a state of utter chaos.

After the war ended, many people both in Israel and abroad expressed their shock that the Arabs would attack Israel on the holiest day of the year, but on the other hand they might have done us a favor. Had they attacked on any other religious holiday, it would have been incredibly difficult to mobilize the army, as many Israelis would have been away on holiday or abroad and not at home. On Yom Kippur there were only two places people would be – either at home or in shul, so call-ups were easy and fast.

Late that evening, Israeli radio finally came on and we were able to hear from the Israeli government and the IDF reports of what was happening; how the Egyptian and Syrian armies had coordinated their attack on Israel for 2 p.m. in the afternoon when the sun blinded the eyes of the Israeli army in Sinai enabling the Egyptian army to take the Israelis by surprise, overrunning forces on the Bar-Lev line in Sinai, while the Syrians attacked on the Golan where they planned to sweep down on the Galilee and almost succeeded in reaching the Kinneret.

That night I lay in bed, but couldn't fall asleep, listening to the clanking of the tanks as they moved down south through the Negev and on to Sinai. All my neighbors worked for the Ministry of Defense at the Nuclear Reactor in Dimona so for them life continued as normal. My husband was the only man called up in our street.

Only later, did we actually understand what was happening. Then we heard, first by word of mouth and then by official casualty lists of the nearly 3,000 dead. Television showed the pictures of the Israeli soldiers taken prisoner, sitting on the ground in their dishevelled uniforms with their arms above their heads. It sent shockwaves throughout the country. We had never before seen Israelis captured as prisoners of war.

Because it took a long time for the authorities to get organized, rumours were rife and it took time to separate fact from fiction. The story that a woman in Haifa had lost all 10 of her sons was fiction, although many believed it at first but tragically, the story that Kibbutz Beit HaShita had lost 11 members, was fact. It was the highest number of casualties in one area.

Gradually we settled into some sort of routine. Schools reopened once the bomb shelters had been cleaned out and were ready for use. High-school children were used to deliver mail. As soon as mail arrived from a soldier, it was sent immediately to his family, not waiting for the official deliveries.

Towards the end of the war, I went with my son on Saturday morning to the bar-mitzvah of a friend of his. I had left my daughter and young son at home alone. While we were at shul, there was a siren over the whole city of Beersheba. It was too far for me to run home so I waited in shul and worried. When I got home, I found that my daughter out of boredom had decided to use the time to bake when the siren went off. She reacted with great poise and self-possession although she was only 14 years old. She switched off the oven and opened all the windows in case of bomb blasts. Then she and my young son sat on the floor in our hall which was the only room that had no windows or outside doors, eating piping hot pastries until we came home. Later, we learnt that the reason for the siren was that an Israeli fighter plane had been hit by an Egyptian missile and was 'limping' back to the Hatzetim air base. Those in charge, feared that it might crash on the city of Beersheba and cause many civilian casualties. The siren was a warning to people to enter their bomb shelters and stay off the streets.

At the time, my 12-year-old son was preparing for his bar-mitzvah which was only a few short months away, but we had no idea of who was alive and who was dead, but that is another story for another time.

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A Word about Brenda:

My name is Brenda Yagil. I grew up in Cape Town and I have lived in Israel for more than 60 years. My husband Reuven and I came to Israel in 1958, living first on Kibbutz Yizre'el, later at Moshav Habonim. We finally moved to Beersheba where I worked at the medical library at Soroka Hospital and later at ICL as English secretary and translator until retirement. After my husband died 3 years ago, I moved to Bet Protea.