



Israel Memorial Day Eve, Iyar 5782

**From Memorial Day and Independence Day to Yom Yerushalayim and Matan Torah
Light blue resembles the sea, the sky and the Divine Throne**

The Tallit that Saved Lives

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The Israeli flag was chosen as the flag of the Zionist Movement in 5657 (1897) by the First Zionist Congress in Basil, Switzerland. The State of Israel adopted it as its official flag in 5708 (1948). The flag features two light blue stripes and a Star of David, between them, on a white background. This flag was preferred because of its roots in Jewish tradition.

Let us take a deeper look at the flag and focus on its color and two stripes lengthwise.

In Jewish tradition, the color *techelet*, light blue, carries deep significance. The *Midrash* teaches us "light blue resembles the sea, and the sea resembles the heavens, and the heavens resembles the Divine Throne" (*Bamidbar Rabbah*, *Bamidbar* 4:13).

In truth, the heavens are colorless and transparent (the sea too, is transparent). The core belief of the Jewish People is the belief in an invisible G-d, so it is no wonder that *techelet* also symbolizes the Divine Throne and the intangible Divine Presence invisible in our lives and in the world at large. No color is more fitting for the Israeli flag than *techelet*.

There is not a more appropriate color for the period between the splitting of the Red Sea and standing before the Divine Presence – the Divine Throne, at Mount Sinai.

The two strips of light blue on either side of the flag, symbolize the fact that all the Jews are one nation, a nation comprising people from different colors and opinions. When all of them come together, they have only one color – the transparent *techelet*.

This is also the important color of the *tallit* and its *tzitziyot* – the strands of *techelet*. The two stripes, which are on almost every *tallit*, are the source of the stripes on the Israeli flag, even if this was not the intention of the Zionist Movement founders. As I see it, at least subconsciously, the resemblance to the *tallit* is what drew them to this decision. Under the wings of the Divine Presence, all of the Jewish People gather, just like children who huddle together beneath their father's *tallit* during the Priestly Blessing.

I would like to share with you a miracle that happened to my friends and me, along with more than twenty IDF soldiers, thanks to a *tallit*.

My friends and I, from *yeshivot hesder*, just a few months before the Yom Kippur war, joined the 217th Reserves Division under the command of Natke Nir, one of the heroes of the Six Day War.

- 2 -

The first time we were called up was on the afternoon of Yom Kippur 5734 (Oct. 1973). We arrived at the war reserves store unit where the tanks were stored, at Bait Daras camp, not far from Be'er Tuvia, in the late afternoon hours. I came together with Dani Steinberg, a fellow *yeshivah* student. He was supposed to be the driver in our tank and I was supposed to be the loader-signaler. Our gunner did not show up since he was drafted before Rosh Hashanah to a different assignment and he left to serve as a *chazzan* and *shofar* blower for the High Holiday services at a Jordan Valley outpost. We met our tank commander, Menachem Lunz, for the first time at the war reserves storage unit. The three of us began working swiftly to prepare and equip the tank for a war whose circumstances we still did not understand. Besides the fact that we were a crew of three instead of four, it turned out that there were many glitches and that basic equipment was missing. These problems held us up and we worked hard to fix them (despite fasting). With great enthusiasm we worked together, giving it our all, so that the tank would be ready as soon as possible.

We finally finished our preparations around 10 PM, and under the constraints at hand, the tank was sort of ready for battle. We did not have a sighting device, there was a shortage of personal weapons and there were no binoculars in the tank (with the exception of a fixed periscope at the gunner's station). Menachem did not receive his own binoculars, vital equipment to perform his job as tank commander and as the one who was supposed to identify the targets and engage the enemy. We waited with bated breath to be notified that the military carriers were ready. Only then, we finally broke our fasts. We each received an apple. Our tank was the first in the battalion ready to go up on the carrier.

A short time later, we loaded the tank on the carrier and the three of us got on a bus, which was part of a convoy. The convoy was supposed to take us to the meeting point with the carriers, a few dozen kilometers from the Suez Canal, to which we were supposed to advance to, on the tank caterpillars. We collapsed on the bus seats, hungry and utterly exhausted, and fell fast asleep. We woke up in the Romani area and set off on our tanks towards the canal.

None of us really understood what was happening in the first twenty-four hours of the war. We set out for battle as a crew of three, while Menachem the tank commander, was supposed to double as loader-signaler. I was also certified as a gunner, so I sat in the gunner's station glued to the periscope that served as our only observation device. After a short time, our eyes beheld horrific scenes and IDF vehicles damaged and deserted (later we found out that they were hit by Egyptian commando units who ambushed them). We still did not fully comprehend the significance of all of this.

We continued and began to realize that the situation did not resemble what we had experienced in the Six Day War.

We reached 10 km from the Suez Canal in the northern strip of El Qantarah, where the battalion parked for the night.

- 3 -

In the middle of the night, the battalion received a command to advance towards the canal and to engage the Egyptian force in order to eliminate it and try to reach the other side of the canal (a command that was completely disconnected from reality). Our battalion commander decided to proceed with caution. Company B, our company, led the battalion. Our tank belonged to the 1st platoon. We were the youngest team and our call sign was 1B.

Menachem led the platoon, which led the company, which led the battalion, meaning that we were the tank at the very front of the 126th battalion in the 217th brigade.

After advancing several kilometers, we noticed movement of infantry forces running in our direction more than 2 km from us. Menachem reported to the company commander, who gave the command to open fire and hit them.

As I mentioned above, we were not able to adjust sights before setting out to battle – critical to make it possible to hit targets. For this reason, we did not hit them, despite the fact that many tanks fired in their direction. Seconds later the many figures disappeared. The company commander instructed us to heighten our vigilance and shoot immediately at anyone who tried to come close.

Shortly after, two figures appeared from behind a sand dune, waving a white flag. The company commander suspected that this was a deception tactic, and the rest of the infantry forces would then attack us from an unexpected direction. The command was to open fire at the two waving the white flag, as it was quite illogical that they would already surrender as the shells fell far from them.

Since I was the only one equipped with a sophisticated observation device, I was able to discern that it was not a white flag. There were two black stripes on either side, and I suspected that it was a *tallit*. I immediately warned Menachem. Menachem called on the company network, to suspend fire since the two might be IDF soldiers who were trying to join us. The entire battalion stopped and waited for the two, who continued to advance in our direction. At this point it was clear that the cloth was a tallit and the two were IDF soldiers waving it, hoping and praying that we would understand who they were.

When they reached our tank, they introduced themselves as two officers, Ilan Gidron and Gil Ofir. Both arrived on Yom Kippur eve at the company's Milano stronghold, stationed on the shore of the canal in El Qantarah to reinforce the tank division. They fought from Yom Kippur afternoon, together with soldiers of the Jerusalem Brigade, who manned the outpost as part of their reserves duty and staved off the Egyptian forces' attack.

At midnight of the first day, outpost commander Yaakov (Yankele) Trostler decided that they did not have a chance to continue to defend the stronghold against the onslaught by the numerous enemy forces. Yaakov gathered all the soldiers of the stronghold and the reinforcement forces and they set off Eastward in attempt to meet IDF forces. They set out more than 60 warriors. Throughout that night they encountered Egyptian ambushes and were forced to wade through the many swamps in the area. Some were killed, others wounded, and yet others fell into Egyptian captivity. In the early morning,

- 4 -

just a little over 20 soldiers remained. The tankers among them recognized the sounds of our motors as Centurion tank motors – the Shot-Kal, which they easily identified. They suggested running in our direction, and thus to be rescued from the Egyptian forces who were on their tail. We, who did not know who they were, fired at them and thank G-d did not harm a single soldier. They decided to take cover behind a sand dune and devise a plan. Ofer Solomon, a classmate of mine from *yeshivah* high school then serving as a *hesder* soldier, was also sent to organize prayer services and blow the shofar on the High Holidays at the Milano stronghold. It was he who came up with the idea to use a *tallit* to identify themselves so that we would hold our fire. Efraim Holland, a member of the Jerusalem Brigade who served as a soldier in Yankele Trolstler's company, had taken his tallit with him for the rescue mission. He gave it to Gil Ofir and Ilan Gidron. Gil and Ilan volunteered for the dangerous mission, going out to meet us.

We were overjoyed. Ilan and Gil went to their friends who were still hiding, and called them to approach our tank under the command of Menachem Lunz. Menachem asked the two to climb up on our tank, and we drew closer to them. They got off and called out to all of their comrades in hiding – more than 20 men. Menachem invited all of them to climb onto our tank. The wounded were brought into the hull. The rest of them sat on top of the tank and we gave them food and drink. Among the soldiers I immediately recognized Ofer Solomon, my friend, who was barefooted since the flip-flops he wore on Yom Kippur fell off in the swamps they traversed during that awful night. Menachem had the privilege, together with Dani and myself, of saving this group from an extremely impossible and dangerous situation.

In the meantime, the wonderful news was relayed to the entire battalion. The command we received was to transfer them all to the closest fort (the back-end outpost), Yoram. At this fort, the General Staff commando unit waited for them to hear from the survivors what actually happened on the banks of the canal. Menachem led the tank towards the fort slowly so that no one would get hurt and while driving, he asked who among the tankers, who were in a tank commander course at the time, would be willing to join our tank as gunner. In seconds, Menachem Ganon volunteered. Despite his difficult experience over the past two days, and despite his miraculous rescue, he volunteered to continue to fight for his nation and country. After we dropped off the survivors at the unit waiting for them, Menachem Lunz, our tank commander, this time with a full crew, led the tank back to the battalion that continued to attempt to engage the enemy.

Once again Menachem led the first tank in the platoon, and thus also in the company and the battalion, moving westward. We continued advancing towards the canal, Menachem exposed on the turret with me on his side, trying to help him observe without binoculars, Menachem Ganon in the gunner's cell and Dani driving from the driver's cell. Suddenly Menachem saw two SU-100s, each double barreled, in the post in front of us. He commanded that I go down into the tank, load a shell in the barrel, and



- 5 -

hold another one in preparation. Menachem commanded we open fire, and we fired the first shell. We missed (for obvious reasons) and the Egyptians retaliated by firing four shells in our direction. The first hit us on the right, the second on the left, the third in front, and the fourth hit the commander's hatch. Menachem Lunz, the tank commander, who was exposed on the turret in attempt to identify the enemy, was killed immediately by the Egyptian shell's direct hit. I was wounded by many pieces of shrapnel that penetrated the commander's hatch and from the loader shelves that were open. Thank G-d the pieces of shrapnel were small and missed vital organs. I also received a heavy blow when my hand was crushed between the shell and the barrel protector when trying to load the second shell into the barrel. Menachem Ganon was the first to regain his composure and yelled to Dani: "Drive in reverse, fast!" In this way he saved us from additional fire.

We received a command to drive to the battalion aid station in Baluza (the largest base in the area), where we brought Menachem Lunz, may G-d avenge his blood, to the military burial society. That evening we returned to the battalion and the three of us were assigned different tanks.

For volunteering and saving the rest of the crew, Menachem Ganon was awarded a citation after the war. Ilan Gidron was killed during the war.

Gil Ofir of Even Yehuda attends the synagogue on Yom Kippur each year with the tallit that he waved at Menachem, who saved him and his friends, and thanks G-d for the miracle. At the end of the Second Lebanon War, Gil's son, an officer in the armored corps, also returned home safely from the harsh battle. Ever since, the two pray in synagogue every Yom Kippur wrapped in the *tallit* that saved lives.

I encountered the name Menachem Lunz on a memorial plaque in the Achdut Yisrael synagogue on Borochov Alley, Jerusalem, commemorating warriors from the Jewish resistance who fell before the State of Israel was established. I didn't understand how this could be. After a quick research, I found out that Menachem Lunz, my commander, walked in the steps of his uncle, who was killed by the British in the Yavni'el colony as a resistance fighter in Lehi.

The members of the group we were privileged to save were from different backgrounds, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Leftists, and Rightists, religious and those who do not define themselves as such, city folks and rural settlers, veteran Israelis and recent immigrants.

All of them fought bravely shoulder to shoulder,
and all of them were saved thanks to the uniting *tallit*.

The *tallit* that saved lives.