



Sergeant Levi at the Kosel, thanking Hashem for the miracles he experienced.

Sergeant Levi

WARRACLE IN GAZZA

After October 7th, Sergeant Levi was sent on the first military entry into Gaza since 2014. The first assignment given to him and his unit was to take over Beit Hanun in the northern peninsula of the Gaza strip. Since he is still active in the IDF (and in fact he is in Gaza as we edit this article), Levi cannot use his full name.

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Devastated by what had happened on October 7th, we waited for the ground entry for three long weeks, filled with anticipation, anger, and a sense of purpose. These emotions ran through our veins as we were still trying to grasp the magnitude of the October 7th attack. With the whole world waiting to see how we would respond and while the smaller Jewish world was wounded, it was our responsibility, *b'ezras Hashem*, to bring back security to the Jewish people and some kind of stability to Israel. Unlike 85 years ago in Nazi Germany when Jews were helpless and unable to defend themselves, we now have an army and a country able to protect the Jewish people from the genocidal terrorist organization Hamas and its supporters.

My mother has a friend who is the daughter of Zigi Shipper, a Holocaust survivor. Zigi's daughter lent me a *tallis* to take to war with me; this is the *tallis* that Zigi used every day. She said I should have it with me and wear it as a symbol of Jewish survival against all odds, and Jewish strength against all enemies. I was honored by the request and felt an even

greater understanding of the magnitude of the attack against our people and the responsibility I had to help secure our safety.

On our way to Gaza my mind was filled with thoughts of the Biblical battles fought in these spaces—the Jews against the Plishtim, the battle of Eben Ezer, Dovid HaMelech facing Goliath—and my thoughts turned to wondering whose side G-d would stand with this time. We have had many miraculous victories, yes, but G-d has not always stood on the side of Jewish armies and warriors in the past, and our people have experienced many defeats over the ages. Even with these thoughts, I felt the unity and strength of the entire Jewish people behind us. We were fighting for the safety and sovereignty of the Jewish people and our Land, just as was fought in those battles long ago—would we find favor in G-d's eyes in our struggle in this time?

Although the world seems unrecognizable from those ancient times, there is much that has not changed, and war just like those of the past has come again to our doorstep.

The night fell and our entry into Gaza was long; our mission was critical and lengthy. After a long firefight in the sand dunes of Beit Hanun, we finally took control of the first buildings and were finally able to rest and put down our equipment after many, many hours of fighting through the rushed and frantic heat of battle where everything moves almost too fast to understand.

After three days and nights of our operation, I finally had a moment to take my *tefillin* and the special *tallis* of Zigi Shipper and wrap them around myself. As I did so, I reflected on the stories of horror I had grown up with. I remember hearing from survivors about helpless Jews being shot in the back of their heads a mere 75 years ago when Nazi Germany sought to wipe us off the face of the earth. Here I was a short three weeks after October 7th, inside the house of one of Hamas'

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commanders, standing proudly as a Jew, fighting to make sure that the murderers are stopped permanently.

I was living proof that we are no longer the Jews on our knees at the edge of the pit as we are sent tumbling into mass graves with our families, simply because the Nazis are armed, trained, and organized, and we are not. We are the generation of the strong Jew, the Jew who can fight and has a country and an army willing and able to protect its land and its people. The moment in Zigi Shipper's *tallis* filled me with emotion, in a world where such meaningful experiences are scarce, and I know the feelings of that moment will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Over one month had passed and we were in the depths of Gaza fighting the ruthless terrorists of Hamas. We had adapted our counterterror techniques to fight Hamas effectively and we had started making serious progress in the war. Wednesday morning we woke up before the sun and set out at dawn on an important mission—to seize yet another Hamas commander's home. We arrived at the target in full force, determined in our mission to find any clues to return our hostages and eliminate any Hamas members. We entered the first floor of the house and cleared it, moving on to the second and third floors.

The previous night (Tuesday night) a friend of mine named Sarah had an awful feeling that I was in danger, and she woke up in the middle of the night frantically calling anyone she could who knew me, trying to find out my full Hebrew name in order to pray for me. Early that Wednesday morning she called a *sofer* and donated money for a letter to be written in a Torah scroll in my name. Sarah did all of this despite being entirely out of contact with me while I was in an operational setting on the front lines and having no specific reason, news, or messages to be suddenly so worried. At the same time as Sarah had her sudden fear for my safety and began praying and donating in my name and for my merit, a cousin of mine also felt a strong need to pray for me and he went to the Kosel and also prayed for my safety.

During that Wednesday mission, after clearing the first floor and moving up to the second and third floors, we triggered a booby trap when breaching the third floor. The building exploded and collapsed on our heads. Miraculously everyone in my unit and in the building made it out alive, and, even more miraculously, none of us suffered any serious injuries. When we returned to the site later to inspect the scene we saw that the magnitude of the explosion was so powerful that it had even destroyed the surrounding buildings, highlighting the miracle of our survival.

It was only several weeks later when I finally was able to speak with Sarah and my cousin that I learned of their sudden intuition and the prayers and *mitzvos* that had been offered on my behalf.

This event was a powerful moment of insight and helped me see that there are more realms than just the physical at play in this war, and that clearly G-d had protected me, and my unit, in this event.

While we are still in the midst of this war, we must continue to stay strong in our morale and thank G-d every day for what we do have and for His protection.

As of mid-January, I finished my time in Gaza for the time being. I had to get back to my tour-guiding business called Tour With Levi, and build it back up, which took a few months. I looked at life differently after my time in Gaza. I knew I needed to educate people who were misguided, about what was actually happening.

It is sad that my friends and I keep on getting called back to service, and this makes running a business incredibly difficult, but I thank G-d and I thank many good people who have helped me through these difficulties.

May G-d continue to protect us. May He bring home our hostages, give strength and success to our soldiers, and bring a final and lasting peace for us and the world. ❧