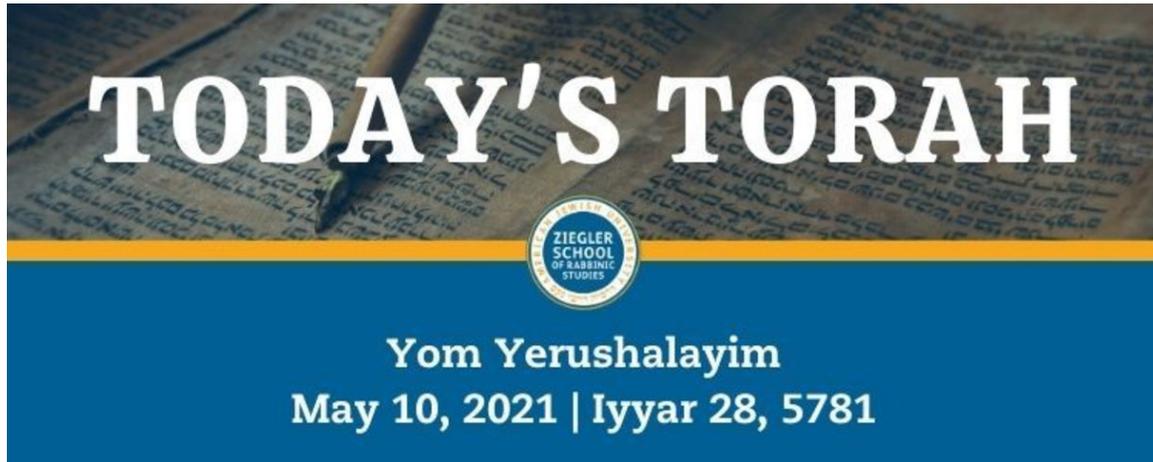




## Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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### Memories and Questions

**By: Rabbi Dr. Michael Berenbaum**

Each year as Yom Yerushalayim approaches, I am flooded with memories and questions. Permit me to share both with you.

I was in Jerusalem on the day of its reunification and I went to the Western Wall with more than 100,000 Israelis but 6 days later to celebrate Shavuot and what seemed then like Israel's miraculous victory.

I was in my senior year in college taking finals when it appeared as if the War in Israel was imminent. The news was bleak. Israel was surrounded by enemies, Egypt and Syria, the Straights of Tiran were closed, the United Nations had withdrawn its troops, the American government was concerned but seemingly unwilling to come to Israel's assistance, Israel had been threatened: "we will drive the Jews into the Sea." Many of us feared that a new Holocaust was upon us: one generation by fire, the next by water. Could the Jewish people survive such a double blow?

I had the sense that Jewish history was about to be made, for the good or bad, and my place was to be where Jewish history was to be made. So instead of going to my graduation scheduled for June 4th, I volunteered to go to Israel for the upcoming all but certain war.

The day before I left, I went to synagogue with my father. Several young men and women from my synagogue were volunteering, and we heard our eulogies being preached. The atmosphere was glum, anxious. Holocaust survivors and German Jewish refugee members of the congregation were having a sense of *déjà vu*.

That Sunday morning, I went to the Jewish Theological Seminary's ordination ceremony to witness my friends becoming Rabbis. The ordination of men – they were only men then – with whom I had gone to camp, with whom I had studied Torah. Elie Wiesel was the ordination speaker. His words were eloquent, urgent, pleading, above all, alarming. I left from ordination to the airport. My parents and grandfather were there; after all, they had planned to be with

me for graduation, the first of my family to graduate college. The goodbyes were long, tearful, yet they were proud.

And once we boarded the plane the atmosphere changed: passionate, confident, determined Israelis were returning home. Our plane was detoured to Paris where we heard the news, seemingly accurate, the war had started, Egypt was on the edge of Tel Aviv, about to take control of the airport at Lod. And yet we were en route to that very airport. We made another unexpected stop in Athens where the newly empowered Junta confined us to a hotel. Later that Monday evening, Israel radio broadcast an accurate depiction of what had happened, the destruction of the Egyptian Air Force, significant forward movement in the Sinai. The Junta then released us from confinement, and we went on to Lod airport.

When I arrived in Israel. I knew that there was only one place I wanted to be – Jerusalem – which had been my home the year before. I was on a bus to Jerusalem when the 11:00 AM news broadcast began with the words: "A spokesman for the IDF had indicated: The Old City is in our hands, I repeat, The Old City is in our hands." There were tears in everyone's eyes. The bus driver had to pull over, merely to steady himself.

On to Jerusalem where I volunteered with the Sanitation Department, driving a garbage truck, unglamorous beginning of my career as a recent college graduate, unglamorous but essential. Garbage had not been collected in many days for the drivers had been called up for the war effort.

That Friday evening with the war still raging and news getting better and better, I went to Beit Hillel, then in the heart of Rechavia, to welcome the Shabbat. Most of the attendees were in uniform, taking a break from the fighting, a moment of reflection. One was not.

In walked the then President of Israel Zalman Shazar, accompanied by the then Chief Rabbi of the IDF Shlomo Goren. The President was asked to speak. A historian and poet, the very embodiment of the State of Israel, could put the historic events of the week in context.

Rabbi Goren introduced him as the first President of a unified Jerusalem, the man who would greet the Messiah riding down Jaffa Street on Monday, a foretaste of the Messianic fervor that was to sweep some religious Israelis.

The President rose and began his memorable address quoting from the Friday evening prayer *Lecha Dodi, Come My Beloved*. His reframe, poetic in its Hebrew.

*"All my days I have prayed:...*

*"And now I have been privileged to witness it.*

*"All my days I have prayed. 'Shake off the dust – arise!*

*Don your splendid clothes, my people.'*

*And now I have been privileged to witness it.*

*All my days I have prayed: 'Wake up! Wake up!*

*For your light has come: rise up and shine.*

*Awaken and utter a song.*

*The glory of Hashem has been revealed to you.'*

*And now I have been privileged to witness it.*

*All my days I have prayed: 'Don't be embarrassed, don't be humiliated.*

*Why are you downcast, Why you disconsolate?*

*In you will my afflicted people find shelter*

*As the city is built on a Hill.'*

*And now I have been privileged to witness it.*

Then as now, the President's words were stirring.

Yet today, 54 years later, we must ask haunting, terrible questions: Israel is still fighting the Six Day War, in a different type of war, at least in the West Bank, in Judea and Samaria.

And the city of Jerusalem, which once had a physical Wall in its heart – to quote Nomi Shemer, who composed Jerusalem of Gold but weeks before the War – dividing Arab and Jew.

Jerusalem now has a spiritual wall more deeply dividing Arab from Jew and Jew from Arab. And one wonders when will Jerusalem be unified? Can Jerusalem be a united city?



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Holocaust survivor in 32 languages and 57 countries. His work in film has won Emmy Awards and Academy Awards.

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