



It is my privilege to write a tribute for this wonderful book of my friend and student Gabi Katz.

Firstly, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Gabi's family as his grandmother Morah Hadassah, as she was fondly known in South Africa, was my first Hebrew teacher, and set me along a path of a love of the Hebrew language. Additionally, Gabi's mother and I were in the same year at school, and hence the connection continued to a second generation. His family then moved to Chicago, and I was thrilled to connect with Gabi when he came to study at Yeshivat HaKotel and participated in a number of our Mizrachi leadership programs- so it's now a third generation.

This beautiful book that Gabi has written is a seamless synthesis of some of our finest Religious Zionist values. It is full of love for the Jewish people, the Torah, and the Land and State of Israel. Gabi's daily reflections on his service as an infantry soldier in the Israeli Defense Forces are a deep and authentic statement about his and our loftiest values. It is an exhilarating example of a young Torah student deeply devoted to the Torah as a Torat Chaim, a Torah connected to the totality of life and relevant to all precincts of personal and public living.

Yishar koach Gabi and I'm sure this book will inspire many others as it has inspired me.

With blessings

Rav Doron Perez
Executive Chairman, World Mizrachi Movement

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue.....	xv
Preface	xvii
Acknowledgments	xx
Introduction	1
BASIC TRAINING	
Beit Sefer L'Handasah Tzva'it (Bahalatz)	3
ADVANCED TRAINING	
Beit Sefer L'Handasah Tzva'it (Bahalatz)	87
KAV, BEIT CHAGAI	
South Chevron Hills.....	161
KAV, SYRIAN BORDER	
Near Quneitra.....	201
IMUN GEDUDI	
Golan and Tzeilim	249
KAV, METZUDOT YEHUDAH	
South Chevron Hills.....	313
POST ARMY	
Jerusalem.....	337
Glossary of Army Terms	343

BASIC TRAINING

Beit Sefer L'Handasah Tzva'it

(Bahalatz)



Day 1

TRANSITION

March 13, 2018 / 26 Adar 5778

“*Modeh ani lefanecha Melech chai v'kayam...rabbah emunatecha*—I give thanks to You, living and eternal King...for having **great faith in me.**” We are in essence thanking Hashem for having enough faith in us to take on this mission of His.

This morning, along with nine of my friends from Yeshivat Hakotel fulfilling their obligation to Hashem and Am Yisrael, I joined the IDF.

Today we had lots of our friends and rabbis dancing, singing, and celebrating this momentous day with us. After a short period of time, it ended with the farewells: farewell to our previous lives and hello to this new adventure. We were taken by bus to an army base, where we were fitted into our uniforms, and then we waited around...for a while. Finally, at 5:30 p.m., we got on a bus and traveled south for five hours to a base just a forty-minute drive north of Eilat.

We have yet to be assigned our *machlakot*, platoons of thirty to fifty people with whom we will be living and doing most of our activities. We will find out tomorrow night.

We're hanging in tight in the meantime so we can finally unpack all of our stuff.

Today is an unforgettable day, and knowing that my friends and family are there for me makes a world of a difference. I know that if I'm in a bad place, I can always rely on them.

Thank you to all who are there for me. And I am looking forward to keeping everyone updated (with a *shtikel* more Torah next time).

Day 2

WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

March 14, 2018 / 27 Adar 5778

As I lie in my bed trying to sneak my phone past *gagash*, a slang word that means “lights out,” I wanted to share something short with you.

Today was crazy. We are timed for everything we do. This morning we were assigned our *machlakot*, and I'm with all the other Yeshivat Hakotel guys, which is going to be amazing. Davening this morning went well. As I got up to do *Birkat Kohanim*, the priestly blessing in the morning, it happened to be that the only other Kohen was my *mefaked* (commander). It was ironically funny that we were standing side by side. At that moment, I realized that no matter how high-ranking people think they are, we are all the same before Hashem.

That reminded me of why I'm here, and why we are all here. We are all in the army together because we are trying to serve Hashem in the best possible way. We are all on the same high level by doing that.

I will share more tomorrow, *b'ezrat Hashem* (hopefully I will get more time)!

Day 3

KAVANAH

March 15, 2018 / 28 Adar 5778

Today was a cloudy day down here in the south of Israel, which is great because on Sunday it's supposed to be 90 degrees Fahrenheit.

Today we did a lot of walking around, and we really didn't accomplish anything; we were just being disciplined. There was this one time when we had to get into the shape of the letter *chet* around ten times, because we couldn't do it within the time they wanted. People were getting so frustrated with one another, and I was a little bit too. I thought to myself, *Why am I getting frustrated and how can I prevent it from happening next time?*

In my spare time, the very minimal amount I have, right before and after davening, I started learning *Netivot Shalom* on the weekly Torah portion; it's one of my favorite commentaries. The *sefer* was written by Rav Shalom Noach Berezovsky, the previous Slonimer Rebbe, who passed away in the year 2000. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayikra*, he writes about an idea I was just thinking about this morning during davening.

Right before *Korbanot*, the Torah portions about sacrifices that we say in davening, we read about *Akeidat Yitzchak*. Why do we read the story of the *Akeidah* during davening? To remind ourselves that we should be willing to give up anything and everything for Hashem. The topic that immediately follows, beginning with “*L’olam*,” discusses how we should fear Heaven and admit the truth to others and to ourselves. It then continues to ask why G-d has mercy on us. Why should He? We are nothing! However, He should have mercy on us because we are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Therefore, we are obligated to thank Him, praise Him, etc.

When Rabbi Berezovsky discusses the *Olah* offering, he writes that the bringer should bring it “according to his will”¹—even though he is obligated to bring it whether he wants to or not.

The answer he brings down is like this: The reason behind giving a *korban* is that in truth, we should really sacrifice ourselves to Hashem, but instead we sacrifice the animal, and therefore we should imagine ourselves as that animal. That is why *kavanah* (intention) is a key factor when it comes to *korbanot*—so much so that if you think the wrong thing, the *korban* is nullified.² That’s why the *pasuk* says “according to his will”—even if we force him to say he wants to—because without intention, the *korban* means nothing.³ This also explains the reason why if we learn about *korbanot* in depth, it is as if we actually brought them.⁴ And this is the same idea as to why davening replaces *korbanot*.⁵

What I took from this was that whatever situation the army will place me in, it shouldn’t bother or frustrate me, as long as I have the clear mindset that I’m serving Hashem. It’s all about *kavanah* and serving Hashem. As long as you follow the Torah and its mitzvot—which, *baruch Hashem*, the army does well when it comes to *tefillah* and *kashrut*, for example—from then on, it’s all about *kavanah*.

1 *Vayikra* 1:3.

2 *Zevachim* 29a.

3 *Netivot Shalom, Vayikra*, p. 7, “*Avodat Hakorbanot*.”

4 *Menachot* 110a; *Megillah* 31b.

5 *Megillah* 31b.

Have a good night, everyone, and don't forget to serve Hashem with the right mindset, because that is key: "*Echad ha'marbeh v'echad ha'mamit u'bilvad she'yichaven libo l'Shamayim.*"⁶

Day 4

WORKING TOGETHER

March 16, 2018 / 29 Adar 5778

Basic training is going really well. Yesterday they taught us how to use a gun and they showed us the importance of gun safety. Next week we will actually be using our guns, and hopefully the week after, we will receive our guns. The papers were signed for us to receive our guns, so technically we each have a gun—just not physically yet.

Yesterday I talked about the importance of *kavanah* in whatever we do in our daily lives: davening, learning Torah, working, studying for tests—whatever it is, we all need to make sure we have the right *kavanah* in everything we do.

In training we are given tasks that involve standing in different positions at different times, and the only way it works is if we all work together. It doesn't matter who gets there first; it all depends on when the last person gets there. Everyone knows the phrase "As long as you're faster than the last person, you'll be okay." Well, when you're in the army, you can be first, and it only counts as if you're as fast as the last person. This phrase works only when you care solely for yourself. In the army you are a team, and you need to care for others too.

Today many of us worked on this *middah* of worrying about other people. Even though in the beginning we do it "*lo lishmah,*" not for the right intentions, eventually we will do it "*lishmah,*" as Chazal say that if we study Torah for the wrong reasons, eventually we will learn it for its own sake.⁷

6 *Berachot* 5b.

7 *Pesachim* 50B.

Similarly, in this week's parashah, *Rashi* explains that we force the guy who gives the *olah* offering to say, "I want to bring it," and eventually he will actually want to bring it.⁸

Quote of the day: From our *mefaked machlakah* (*Mem-Mem*), platoon commander: "It's not about what you need from the unit; it's about what the unit needs from you" (translated into English, but it sounds better in Hebrew).⁹

Even if in the beginning, we are helping each other out because we don't want to get into trouble or because we want to personally succeed, by the end of the training, there is no doubt that we will be helping each other because we will all care for one another like a family—and that's the goal.

Something amazing happened today. While waiting around for our *mefaked* we had five minutes to do our own thing. Some of us were learning, some were filling up their water canteens, and others just waiting around. Then, one of the guys started to sing: "*Yismechu b'malchutecha...*" (a classic Hakotel song we sing every Friday night) and a circle started to form, two people turned into three, three people became four, and so on. After about half a minute we had thirty people singing and preparing for Shabbat. At that moment I felt like I was back in yeshiva and our spirits were lifted for the rest of the day.

Have an amazing Shabbat and keep in touch. Sorry I don't respond to individual messages, I don't have too much time, but I'm thinking of all of you.

Shabbat Shalom!

8 *Vayikra* 1:3, "*Yakriv oto.*"

9 "זה לא קשור למה שאתה צריך מהמחלקה, זה קשור למה המחלקה צריכה ממך."

Day 5

FIRST SHABBAT IN THE ARMY

March 17, 2018 / 1 Nisan 5778

Shabbat was actually so nice and relaxing here on base. There was so much singing and learning going on. Shabbat was the first time we actually had a break, especially since we are not allowed to receive commands on Shabbat. It was the first time I actually got to think by myself here on base. The whole time since we got here, I hadn't even thought about where we actually are. Today I finally got to think about it: we are in the middle of the desert, forty minutes north of Eilat.

Today when we sang "*Shir Hamaalot*,"¹⁰ it hit me harder than it ever had before. I feel that *Shir Hamaalot* describes my situation so well at this moment. King David wrote this to explain to us how we will sow the fields with tears, but in the end, we will reap with joy.

We also request that Hashem shall return us (to Israel) like the springs in the Negev.

Chazal often compare Torah to water.¹¹ By being able to bring so much Torah to the middle of nowhere—the desert—it felt like we were fulfilling a *nevuah* (prophecy)!

Overall, we had an amazing Shabbat, with even more energy than we had in yeshiva, and I'm looking forward to the rest of the week!

Shavua Tov v'Chodesh Tov!

Day 6

BARUR

March 18, 2018 / 2 Nisan 5778

My army service has officially begun. We spent the day learning about M16s, the guns we will be receiving this week, and it's been a little

10 *Tehillim* 126.

11 *Avodah Zarah* 5b.

difficult understanding all the different parts, especially since it's taught in Hebrew. *Baruch Hashem*, my friends and I are getting through it. The seven hours of sleep the army requires us to get every night have been really amazing—especially for today, as we need to take our test and be focused.

Today we had our *barur*, physical test. This test was to make sure we were ready to receive our guns: a three-kilometer run, three pull-ups, and eight dips.

With the pull-ups and the dips, I was just able to pass, but I was able to complete the run very easily.

We ran on the outskirts of the base, which happened to be our first time there, and the view was just incredible. On the run we could see the mountains of Jordan, and they are gorgeous. All I can say to that is “*Mah rabu maasecha Hashem*—How great are Your works, O Lord.”¹²

During the run, I knew I had to try my hardest, and I succeeded. I finished the run in just under thirteen minutes. What really pushed me at the end of the run was this song I was singing, which is based on the words we say at the end of davening from the thirteen principles of Jewish faith composed by the *Rambam*. Today we actually happened to sing this at the end of davening, and these are the words: “*Ani maamin b’emunah sheleimah b’viat haMashiach ani maamin*—I believe with perfect faith in the coming of Mashiach.” I’m not sure why, but I started singing that song to get me over the finish line. My thought process was like this: *What if Mashiach was standing at that finish line?* And after that motivation, I ran my hardest, faster than I’ve ever run before.

During *Maariv*, evening prayers, everyone was so exhausted because of the run. When people were answering Amen to each Kaddish, there was so much *kavanah* missing. I said to myself, “If it were our commander we were talking to, would we talk like that? *Kal v’chomer*, all the more so, when we’re talking to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the Holy One, blessed be He.” Therefore, tonight I had one of my best *tefillot*, with extra *kavanah*.

12 *Tehillim* 104:24.

That's a message we can all take into our lives. Most of us are on spring break now or *bein hazmanim*, and sometimes we are so busy doing other things that our *tefillot* are lacking because of our exhaustion. Just like we do things during the day with alacrity, *kal v'chomer*, we should speak to the Master of the World, the Creator of everything, with a little more respect and enthusiasm.

Hope you all have a meaningful "break"—a break from your regular schedule—while hopefully keeping in mind that no one can ever have, or want, a break from the One Above. Our service of G-d should always be 24-7 for our entire lives.

Have an amazing week, everyone!

Day 7

BOMB LESSONS

March 19, 2018 / 3 Nisan 5778

Today we woke up at 5:30 a.m., but, *baruch Hashem*, we still had seven hours of sleep. Today was probably the most physically exhausting day so far. Before I get to what we did that made it so tiring, I want to tell you what we did overall.

We had a long lesson about bombs and radiation, and all that great stuff, which was hard since everything was in Hebrew. Just so you understand a little about my Hebrew skills, I'd say I can handle small conversations, but when it's a whole day filled with sophisticated words that don't come up in conversation, it's definitely a bit more challenging! Later in the day we had a driving lesson.

I had a meeting today with our *mefaked plugah* (*Mem-Peh*), company commander, and he is the nicest guy (*dati leumi*, national religious). We spoke for about ten to fifteen minutes. I spoke a little about myself and my motivations for being here. I also told him my history of how my *savta* was in the army back in the mid-1960s, and he loved it! I'm hoping to keep up this *kesher*, connection, with him.

After a long day of trying to understand all this radiation and bomb stuff, we finally reached the evening, and the night activity was Krav Maga.

The army has the most intimidating and harshest instructors. I'm surprised we made it out of there still breathing; they pushed us so far. The further they pushed us, the further we were able to reach.

I'm slowly working on my physical abilities. After Krav Maga, we still needed to daven *Maariv*. We were all so exhausted and all we wanted to do was go to sleep. But we davened anyway. We pushed ourselves above our limits.

I asked myself, "How does one stay so focused after such a long and difficult day, physically and mentally?"

Today I read a little bit of *Igeret HaRamban*. This is a letter the *Ramban* wrote to his son eight hundred years ago, yet it is so applicable and so important today.

He gives a great insight: "Cast external matters from your mind when you stand to pray; carefully prepare your heart in the presence of the Holy One. Purify your thoughts and ponder your words before you utter them."

After learning a bit of this letter this morning, I was able to have unbelievable *kavanah* during *Maariv*, even after such a hard day.

Keep this in mind in every situation, and may it help you push through the hard times.

P.S. We are receiving our guns on Wednesday!

Day 8

GUN DAY

March 20, 2018 / 4 Nisan 5778

Today at 9:00 a.m., we finally received our guns. It was super anticlimactic. We each have to carry our gun everywhere we go. That means to the shower, to the bathroom, to our bed—everywhere. We don't have any bullets yet, so don't worry.

As soon as we got our guns, we started training with them. And if training yesterday wasn't hard enough, today was backbreaking training in 80–85-degree weather. We got down and dirty, falling on rocks, practicing repeatedly how to shoot a gun and what position to lie down in. We also practiced doing this quickly. After an hour and a half of intense

training, we were so tired, full of sweat and dust from all the rocks we had thrown ourselves onto.

At the end, our *Mem-Mem* asked us a shocking question: “Why do you look so tired and upset?” Oh, did I have a very easy answer for him, but then he said, “You have the rocks of Eretz Yisrael on you, no?” That shook me to the core, especially since he is not even religious, and he understands the spiritual value of Eretz Yisrael more than I do.

It reminded me of a story that Rav Hadari, who was the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Hakotel for over twenty-five years, shared with us last year over the *Yamim Noraim*. There is a *pasuk* in *Vayikra* we say every day in davening, which is emphasized a little more in the *tefillah* on Rosh Hashanah: “*V’zacharti et briti Yaakov v’af et briti Yitzchak v’af et briti Avraham ezkor v’haaretz ezkor*—Then will I remember My covenant with Yaakov; I will remember also My covenant with Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham; and I will remember the land.”¹³

Rav Hadari explained that the names of our Avot (forefathers), in this *pasuk* are reversed. Why? The reason is because it’s a curse. Rav Hadari, based on *Kli Yakar*, says that even if you don’t keep the mitzvot, it should hopefully be enough that the merit of Yaakov should work. If that doesn’t work, the merit of Yitzchak should do. And if that doesn’t work, the merit of Avraham will suffice. And if none of those work, the *zechut*, merit, of Eretz Yisrael will prove effective. Rav Hadari continues and explains this to mean that if you don’t keep the Torah and mitzvot, then at least the *zechut* of Eretz Yisrael will be good for you. The second comment of the *Kli Yakar* on this *pasuk* is that the land doesn’t sin and, therefore, with that *zechut* and us living here, we should be judged favorably.¹⁴

I really saw that today with my *Mem-Mem*.

Have an amazing day everyone, and don’t forget Eretz Yisrael!

13 *Vayikra* 26:42.

14 *Kli Yakar* on *ibid*.