

A DIFFERENT LIGHT

A PLURALIST ANTHOLOGY

THE BIG BOOK OF HANUKKAH

Pluralistic Perspectives on the Festival of Lights:

A broad-ranging anthology of short essays by thinkers, historians, and scientists on Hanukkah themes

Profiles in Modern Jewish Courage:

A collection of dramatic stories about contemporary Jewish heroes — great and small — and their inner search for courage

BY NOAM SACHS ZION
AND BARBARA SPECTRE



A companion to

A Different Light:

The Hanukkah Book of Celebration

YONI NETANYAHU

THE PHILOSOPHER-SOLDIER AND THE RESCUE OF THE HOSTAGES⁴¹ (ENTEBBE AIRPORT, UGANDA, JULY 4, 1976)

Yoni — a constant battle against sleep, fatigue, self indulgence, forgetfulness, inefficiency, helplessness, lying. Yoni turns the impossible into the possible.

— E. BAR-MEIR, A FRIEND

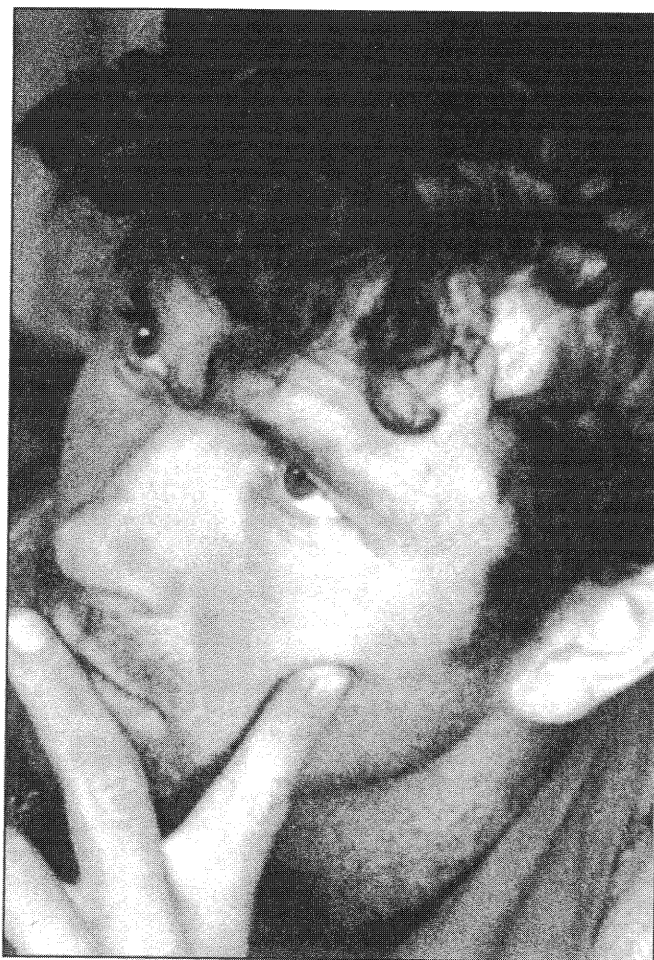
Because each and every minute is made up of seconds and of even briefer fragments of time, and every fragment ought not to be allowed to pass in vain... I must feel certain that not only at the moment of my death shall I be able to account for the time I have lived; I ought to be ready at every moment of my life to confront myself and say — This is what I've done.

— YONI, AGED 16 [SELF-PORTRAIT OF A HERO, P. 7]

What a mad world we live in! In the twentieth century man has reached the moon and is out for more. The twentieth century has seen Hitler and his mass murders, as well as the terrible First World War — and still all this hasn't cured us.

We watch as a whole people is being starved to death, and no one in this ugly world is moved by it sufficiently to do something. Everybody is preoccupied by his own wars (including Israel, including me), and no state goes in there with its army to put an end to the whole thing. But of course not! No one wants to get involved. Men are such strange animals. I prophesy a brilliant future for us as ugly particles floating in space after the big bomb that is bound to come.

— YONI, 1969, [SELF-PORTRAIT OF A HERO, P. 187]



Yoni Netanyahu listening to a troubling military briefing from the Commander of the Northern Front, facing Syria on the Golan Heights during the Yom Kippur War, 1973. (Courtesy of the Netanyahu Family)

41. The information for this section was drawn from several sources and attributed quotes derive from *Self-Portrait of a Hero*, Jonathan Netanyahu and the "Afterword" by Iddo Netanyahu [I.N.] (Warner Books, Random House, 1980 pp. ix, 6-8, 66, 125, 128, 134, 140, 163-164, 171-174, 177, 187, 258, 283-293, 298, 301-302 with corrections by Professor Benzion Netanyahu — selections are reprinted with the generous permission of the Netanyahu family); from Kent Valentine [K.V.], "Terrorists" from *Military History*; from Chaim Herzog [C.H.], *Heroes of Israel* (Little, Brown and Co, 1980, pp. 274, 276) with the permission of Wiedenfeld and Nicholson as well as one brief selection from Shimon Peres [S.P.], "The Bearer of the Sheaves," *The Lionhearts*, edited by Michael bar Zohar (p. 286), for which permission was requested.

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A YOUNG SOLDIER AND PHILOSOPHER, YONI NETANYAHU, 1946-1976

by Iddo Netanyahu and Chaim Herzog
with Letters by Yoni Netanyahu

The famous Israeli soldier who led the most daring rescue of hostages in history, at the Entebbe airport in Uganda on July 4, 1976, was born in America. His father was a professor of the history of the Jews in the Middle Ages, in particular the Jews of Spain during the Inquisition, and a committed Revisionist Zionist. The family returned to Jerusalem during the War of Independence in 1948. However, in 1963 Yoni, already an idealist leader in the Israeli scouting movement at age 16, was wrenched from Israel and taken back to the United States with his family, while his father finished his work as editor-in-chief of the Encyclopedia Hebraica.

During these high school years in Israel and in exile in America and during the next twelve years of his life in Israel, Yoni found a cause worth living and dying for. He fought for Israel in the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War. During that whole period he would fight bravely, lead his men and then try to withdraw into urban life — studying at Harvard, getting married — but each time he would feel the call to duty and he would reenlist. Yoni lived intensely the contrasts between his American high

school experience and his experience in the Israeli scout movement, between the campuses of Harvard and the Hebrew University and an elite assault unit and between urban life and killing terrorists at point blank range. These fueled his sensitive and philosophic reflections on life and death and his sophisticated commitment to the Jewish people.

These reflections teach us so much about a unique type of military heroism. They present a glimpse of a responsible citizen who loves his personal life and yet is willing to sacrifice himself for the collective life of his society. In these thoughtful letters we discover a deeply self-aware human being, aware of the deep sadness of young people like himself, who occasionally feel prematurely old when they realize they are fighting a long war possibly without end.

We begin this section with the action packed drama of the Entebbe Raid and Yoni's part in the last battle of his life. Then we will go back to the important junctures in his life bringing selections from his deeply insightful letters reprinted in Self-Portrait of a Hero.

OPERATION YONATAN NETANYAHU: ENTEBBE, JULY 4, 1976

Late in the afternoon of July 3, 1976, as the people of the United States prepared to celebrate their national bicentennial, a series of meticulously planned events were beginning to unfold halfway around the world. Four heavily laden Lockheed C-130 Hercules transports of the Israeli Air Force were skimming low over the Red Sea, hoping to avoid radar detection as they headed toward Africa.

On the flight deck of the lead "Hippo," the affectionate nickname the aircrews had for the Hercules, the pilot listened intently as a few terse code words were relayed to his headset from IDF headquarters near Tel Aviv. Moments later, the pilot turned and shouted over the din of the loud turboprops to a silent figure sitting in a jump seat in the rear of the cockpit: "Operation Thunderbolt is a go!"

Aboard the first C-130, Yoni Netanyahu, assault commander of the commandos, sat silently in the front seat of a black Mercedes-

Benz sedan. Since Ugandan President Amin had made a point of visiting the hostages several times since their arrival, the planners knew that he customarily rode in a black Mercedes. They hoped that the use of a look-alike car might serve as a deception, to buy the strike force a few extra precious seconds of surprise. [K.V.]

Flashback:

The Hijacking, June 27, 1976

Six days before, on June 27, an Air France flight originating in Tel Aviv picked up passengers in Athens en route to Paris. Among the additional passengers who boarded the aircraft during its short layover in Greece were four nondescript individuals carrying a number of parcels. Unknown to the crew and passengers, two of the four were members of Germany's infamous Baader-

Meinhof left-wing revolutionary terrorist organization. They were accompanied by two Arabs, both of whom were longtime operatives in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) — an active cell of Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Soon after takeoff, the four terrorists pulled pistols and grenades from their packages and quickly seized control of the aircraft. One of the hijackers gained entry into the cockpit and forced the Air France captain to turn the large jet toward Benghazi, Libya.

During a lengthy stop in Libya, the plane was refueled, a hostage (a pregnant woman feigning labor) was released, and three more terrorists came aboard bringing the total to seven. The terrorists ordered the pilot to take off once again, this time setting course for Entebbe, Uganda. The jet flew through the night, arriving early on the morning of June 29th. [K.V.]

In Uganda, some two hundred hostages were herded into the old terminal building. Then one of the German hijackers told them that the hall where they were being detained was overcrowded, so that some whose names would be called would be moved to an adjacent hall. All at once, the hostages

All at once, the hostages realized that the names being called out: Rosenberg, Aaronovich, Brodsky . . . were all Jews. The Germans were conducting a "selection," segregating those who would die from those who would live, forty years after the Holocaust.

realized that the names being called out: Rosenberg, Aaronovich, Brodsky . . . were all Jews. The Germans were conducting a "selection," segregating those who would die from those who would live, forty years after the Holocaust. The non-Jewish hostages were then released leaving some 103 Jewish hostages as well as the Air France crew.

That day, the President of Uganda, Idi Amin, arriving in his beloved late model black Mercedes limousine, visited the hostages in the terminal and flamboyantly assured them he was working to achieve their release and that Ugandan soldiers would remain around the terminal to ensure their safety. In fact, Idi Amin (who ironically had been trained by Israeli military advisors before his takeover of the Ugandan government) had become a vindictive enemy of Israel and was collaborating fully with the terrorists.

On June 30th at 3:30 p.m. a Palestinian terrorist nicknamed the "Peruvian" announced the terrorist demands: Release 53 convicted terrorists held in Israel (40) and in France, Germany and Kenya (13) or else the hostages would be executed one at a time beginning at 2 p.m. on July 1.

In response, the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin (then in his first term of office) called an emergency Cabinet meeting and reviewed the military and political options. France, whose national airline had been hijacked and who had troops stationed in nearby Djibouti, never showed any interest in mounting a rescue mission. [EDITOR]

Rabin was under tremendous pressure from the relatives of the hostages in Israel to negotiate with the terrorists. However, in Entebbe, the hostages themselves were standing up to the pressure rather better than their relatives back home. Faced with a personal demand by Idi Amin to write a letter to their government demanding the release of the terrorists in exchange for themselves, they agonized for an entire day over its composition. "It had to be acceptable to Amin," recalled Sarah Davidson, a hostage, "but we were determined to include nuances that would be understood by the government of Israel, indicating that we were not asking for surrender to the hijackers' demands."

[C.H. 274]

On July 1, after the Israeli Chief of Staff Motta Gur reported that the army had no viable rescue plan, given the 2,200 miles from Israel to Uganda, Rabin agreed very reluctantly-

ly to negotiate with the terrorists. This violated a sacred principle of Israeli policy that there can be no negotiations with terrorist kidnappers. "My intention was not to use a ruse or a tactical ploy to gain time," Prime Minister Rabin later wrote of his government's decision, "but to enter into serious negotiations with Israel fulfilling whatever commitments it made." At that point the terrorists postponed their deadline to July 4th to give a brief chance to negotiations. [EDITOR]

Meanwhile, in Entebbe, the remaining 103 hostages were huddled in the building, as their captors awaited the expiration of their "final" deadline — Sunday, July 4. Although their considerable distance from Israel placed them outside the known combat radius of the Israel Air Force, the terrorists left nothing to chance — they posted guards around the clock, augmenting them with members of Ugandan President Idi Amin's armed forces. The terrorists were determined to ensure that this action not become a repeat of the PLO's unsuccessful attempt to capture and hold a Sabena Airlines 727 at Lod Airport in Israel on May 8, 1972. In that operation, a team of elite Israeli commandos, including Yoni's brother, future Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Benjamin's commander, future Prime Minister Ehud Barak, had stormed the aircraft the next day, while dressed as airline mechanics, killing or capturing all four terrorists and freeing the hostages. [K.V.]

Yoni's Plan: July 1-2, 1976

In Israel the elite anti-terrorist commando unit headed by Yoni Netanyahu was called upon to prepare a rescue option to be developed while negotiations proceeded. The Defense Minister Shimon Peres explained: "Yoni had been appointed head of the unit a year earlier. This appointment requires serious deliberation, both on the part of the General Staff and of the soldiers and their officers. The commander chosen is responsible for very daring acts, which are sometimes dangerous. The morale and the

skill of such are to a large extent dependent on the commander. His character, his courage, his resourcefulness, and his leadership ability are constantly being tested. Thus, before making such an appointment, the General Staff not only asks the opinion of the candidate's senior officers, but also of his future soldiers. (There are two kinds of reports given on soldiers and officers, one through the hierarchic channels of the army and one an unofficial report that circulates among the men. The official report determines the rank of the man; the unofficial one determines his status.) Yoni was a natural choice, an appointment undisputed both by those above him and by those below him. He had already proved himself in actual battles to be a man of rare courage, resourcefulness, and unusual wisdom." [S.P.]

Yoni had just finished grueling maneuvers in the desert when he was called to the Entebbe mission. He threw off his exhaustion and started analyzing intelligence reports. Many Israelis had served in Uganda years before, when it was still friendly towards Israel. Several Israeli officers had assisted in the training of Ugandan troops, and their knowledge was now utilized. Photographs of the airport were scanned and a "home movie," which showed Idi Amin arriving in a black Mercedes limousine escorted by a Land Rover, gave the planners a new idea.

At the same time Israeli agents were dispatched to Paris, where they debriefed the non-Israeli passengers [who had been released and were] now back in the French capital, and who gave full information about conditions at the airport. The interrogators were able to discover the daily routine at the airport, where the passengers were held, where the terrorists slept, the number, nature and character of the terrorists and the location of the Ugandan soldiers. More information became available from a television film of Entebbe airport by a foreign correspondent. [C.H. 276]

By Thursday night July 1 there was a basic plan of attack. The Unit's officers convened

around midnight to receive an initial briefing from Yoni and instructions on preparations. "Yoni was very tired," recalls a fellow soldier. "You could see it by looking at him. Actually we were all tired from the whole week we had just finished, the officers in particular. So at a certain point I suggested that we stop and get some sleep. This was around 2 or 3 A.M. on Friday morning. Yoni agreed, and the small planning team went to sleep, but it

We had a problem with lack of intelligence. But Yoni said: 'Do you know of any operation that wasn't carried out half-blind? Every operation is half-blind.'

turned out later that Yoni remained alone at his office and continued to work on the plan. And in fact, when he presented the plan at 7 A.M. the following morning, after sleeping at most one or two hours, I saw how far he had carried the work from where we left off. There were many points in the plan that we had not considered, which Yoni had thought through to the end. That morning he presented the plan complete, perfect, down to the last detail."

The plan called for the Unit's initial force of some thirty men to be flown to Entebbe and to land at night near the new terminal. From there the men were to proceed to the old terminal, arriving in the Mercedes and two Land Rover jeeps, the kind of vehicles frequently used by the Ugandan army. It was hoped that the Ugandan guards surrounding the building would assume that this was a force of their own, perhaps the one that accompanied President Idi Amin on his occasional visit to the hostages. In this manner, it was hoped that the Unit's men would be able to approach the Ugandan guards without first being fired upon. "During the preparations for the raid Yoni foresaw where we would encounter two Ugandan guards . . . and our response in such a case was to take out the two guards with

silencers." [I.N. 284]

On Friday night, July 2, Yoni conducted a full dress rehearsal before the Chief of Staff using a pole-and-burlap mock-up of the Entebbe terminal. A Mercedes had been found in Israel and requisitioned. Since the Israeli car was a light color, it had to be painted black to match Idi Amin's limo. As Yoni once told his soldiers when he was a tank battalion commander, "I believe in getting down to the smallest details. I believe there can be no compromise with results. Never accept results that are less than the best possible, and even then look for ways to improve and perfect them. I believe that the greatest danger in the life of a unit is *not* to be a bit worried — perhaps there is something else we might have done, something we might have improved and didn't." [EDITOR]

Over and over again, the tired soldiers repeated the attack, shaving seconds off the time needed to disembark from the plane and reach the old terminal. Speed was absolutely vital if a massacre of the hostages was to be avoided. [C.H. 276]

On Shabbat morning, July 3, Yoni was called for a meeting with the Defense Minister Shimon Peres (later Prime Minister and winner with Yitzchak Rabin of the Nobel Peace Prize). [EDITOR]

"Yoni stood there (outside Peres's door) with maps in his hands, very preoccupied . . . He was pressed for time and said that he was in a terrible hurry and they should let him in already." "He presented the plan to me in detail," recalls Peres, "and I liked it very much. The two of us sat alone . . . My impression was one of exactingness and imagination . . . and complete self-confidence . . . which without a doubt influenced me. We had a problem with lack of intelligence. But Yoni said: 'Do you know of any operation that wasn't carried out half-blind? Every operation is half-blind.' Yoni told me that the operation was absolutely doable. And as to the cost, he said we had every chance of coming out of it with almost no losses."

Before the mission began, Yoni spoke to his men. He probably expressed a credo similar to what he had told his tank battalion several years earlier: "I believe that the buck should not be passed to anyone else — that it should stop here, with us. I believe with all my heart in our ability to carry out any military mission entrusted to us, and I believe in you. And I believe in Israel and in the sense of responsibility that must accompany every man who fights for the fate of his homeland." "It was a speech I'll never forget," says one of the assault soldiers. "He gave us confidence that we could do it. His leadership and his ability to affect us were simply above and beyond anything." [I.N. 283-286]

In the meantime as the Israeli planes sat in Sharm el Sheik in Sinai on Shabbat, the Israeli Cabinet debated the advisability of approving the risky rescue plan. As the hours dragged, the Chief of Staff realized time was running out for the launching of the planes. He pulled Rabin aside and got approval to send Operation Thunderbolt (later renamed Operation Yonatan) into the air with the possibility of recalling them by radio should the Cabinet relent. [EDITOR]

The lead plane was crowded. It carried Yoni's assault party with its Mercedes. They were flying over the Red Sea, just a few yards above water to avoid radar detection by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Soon they received the go ahead from the Cabinet and they gathered their strength for their "mission impossible."

"I believe that the buck should not be passed to anyone else — that it should stop here, with us. I believe with all my heart in our ability to carry out any military mission entrusted to us, and I believe in you — the battalion. And I believe in Israel and in the sense of responsibility that must accompany every man who fights for the fate of his homeland."

The Assault on Entebbe Airport

11 P.M. July 3

At 11 P.M. on Saturday night the airport could be seen at a distance, with its runway lights fully lit. Yoni proceeded to get into the passenger seat of the Mercedes. The back ramp was being lowered as the plane was descending toward the runway, and Yoni told the driver to start the car's engine with its Ugandan flags flying and all 35 Israeli commandos dressed in Ugandan style army uniforms.

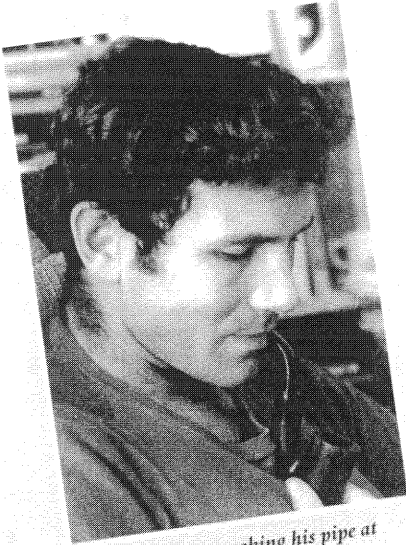
As the plane landed on the tarmac, the Ugandans in the main control tower probably did not understand what was going on. Some paratroop soldiers jumped off while the plane was taxiing, placing lighted markers on the runway, so that the other three planes would be able to land in case the runway lights were switched off by the men in the control tower. The Hercules transport came to a halt at the designated point and the vehicles got out quickly, led by Yoni's Mercedes. This runway led directly to the old terminal building, where the hostages were being held. "We were sitting in the jeep. We saw it as if in a movie. The Mercedes was advancing, and at a certain point we were approaching the terminal." However, two Ugandan guards appeared at exactly the spot that had been envisaged during the rehearsal in Israel. "When I saw those two guards waiting for us, like the guards Yoni had placed in the rehearsal, I knew that this operation would succeed," says the youngest soldier on the force.

"... Suddenly, the Ugandan soldier shouted and came toward us. He approached the Mercedes and made a threatening movement with his weapon ... and cocked his rifle ... It was obvious to me that the guard had to be taken out. He then moved into shooting position, raised the rifle to his shoulder. I was sure he was about to fire — no 'ifs' about it."

"If the guard had fired first, the whole operation might have sunk," said the man

Philosopher Soldier

What was Yoni reading while sitting in the Mercedes on the flight to Entebbe? We do not know but it may have been similar to his reading list described in a much earlier letter dated February 1967.



Yoni as a student smoking his pipe at Harvard University.
(Courtesy of the Netanyahu Family)

[EDITOR]

1967

February

Dear Father and Mother,

You asked for a list of books I've read which is to be submitted to Harvard. I recall the following few titles, which can be added to those I gave you:

Crime and Punishment, by Dostoyevsky

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner,
by Sillitoe

Humanists, by Paul Landau

Night, by Elie Wiesel

Amok, by Stefan Zweig

The City of Fortune, by Elie Wiesel
(a remarkable book)

Right now I am engrossed in The Third Reich and the Bible at the same time and find it hard to stop even for a moment. As Bibi⁴² once suggested, I've bought myself a little pad and note down every English word I don't know, so that my vocabulary gets bigger.

Yoni⁴³

42. Bibi is a nickname for Benjamin Netanyahu, later Prime Minister of Israel

43. I.N. 125, 128

who was driving the Mercedes. "Yoni told me: 'Slow down a little, we'll approach them.' He told me to slow down so that we wouldn't frighten them, as if we're about to identify ourselves . . . Yoni was quite calm." He and his fellow soldiers had silenced pistols ready in hand. When the Ugandan soldier who was aiming his rifle at them was only several yards away, they fired.

"Yoni told me now to speed up. We went at full speed for about 200 meters or so. He instructed me to stop in front of the control tower." Then the assault on the old terminal began. Any pause in the assault could have disastrous consequences had it continued longer than it did. Every second's delay increased the chances that the terrorists would begin to kill the hostages. When Yoni

saw that the lead man did not respond to his commands, he lurched ahead, thereby signaling the men to follow him.

When Yoni had led the charge up to the entrance of the terminal, he was shot by one of the terrorists. "I saw him make half a turn, with his face contorted and sink down a little bit, with his knees bent."

Someone had shouted that Yoni was hit, but the men of the force continued in their tasks, following Yoni's orders not to take care of the wounded until the hostages were freed. Each of them realized that time was of the essence, as it would have taken only seconds for the terrorists, once they realized what was going on, to have sprayed automatic fire on the huddled hostages.

"When I was about ten yards from the door, I saw the glass break and understood that someone was shooting at me," says an Israeli soldier. "Without thinking twice I shot him through the glass and saw that he was hit." An Israeli commando entered the main hall, where the hostages were being held. He discovered that he was the first soldier inside. Immediately upon his footsteps came his commander who, once he entered the room, saw two terrorists crouching, a man and a woman, aiming their Kalashnikovs at him.

The planes carrying the soldiers landed in Israel in the morning. Rabin and Peres were there to greet them. Peres turned to one of the soldiers and asked: "How was Yoni killed?"

"He went first, he fell first."

He quickly fired at them and killed them. Next, they scanned the room looking for more terrorists. "I looked to my left and saw the two terrorists who were shot. I also saw the fully lit room with all the hostages lying on the floor. After a short time, from the left, a terrorist suddenly leaped up, holding a weapon. I shot him. The first bullet hit his Kalashnikov, went through his weapon, and entered his chest. I shot three bullets that hit him and finished him off." The hostages were still in a daze, flattened out on the floor. Almost all of them were left unhurt. [I.N. 287-292]

Within three minutes of landing and fifteen seconds of opening fire, four of the seven terrorists had been killed. As Yoni's soldiers cleared the terminal, a lone terrorist ran into the building shouting. "The Ugandans have gone crazy! They are shooting at us." The element of surprise and the use of Ugandan style uniforms had worked. The soldiers shot

that fifth terrorist and broke into the VIP lounge of the terminal where they found and killed the remaining two terrorists.

Within fifteen minutes of the landing, all seven terrorists were dead, the 103 hostages were freed with only three who eventually died of their wounds, and within less than one hour, at 11:52 P.M., July 3, the first Hercules transport left with the hostages and with the seriously injured Yoni Netanyahu. The rest of the soldiers took off at 12:29 A.M. after blowing up eleven Ugandan MIG fighters parked on the runway. Ninety-nine minutes after landing, the rescue mission was complete. [EDITOR]

The Return Home: Relief without Joy

"On our plane there had been endless chatter," recalls one soldier, "everyone telling everyone what happened to him. It seemed that everything was going great, that we'd succeeded. And then someone came in and said that Yoni had died, and all at once, it seemed as if someone had turned off the entire plane. Everybody was silent . . . We were hit hard, and each of us withdrew into himself."

In Jerusalem, the Chief of Staff entered Shimon Peres's office, where the defense minister had laid down to rest. Peres wrote in his diary, "At four in the morning, the Chief of Staff came into my office, and I could tell he was very upset. 'Shimon, Yoni's gone. A bullet hit him in the heart.'" "This is the first time this whole crazy week," Peres wrote, "that I cannot hold back the tears."

The planes carrying the soldiers landed in Israel in the morning. Rabin and Peres were there to greet them. Peres turned to one of the soldiers and asked: "How was Yoni killed?" "He went first, he fell first." [I.N. 292-293]

A Lamentation for the Biblical and the Israeli "Jonathan"

BY DEFENSE MINISTER SHIMON PERES, JULY 6, 1976

Operation Entebbe is unique in military history. Against a peak of terror, assisted by the army and president of Uganda, at a distance of over four thousand kilometers from home, in one short hour, the posture of the entire Jewish people — in fact, the posture of free and responsible men all over the world — was straightened.

This operation necessitated the taking of an enormous risk, but a risk that seemed to be more justifiable than the other one that was involved — the risk to surrender to terrorists and blackmailers, the risk that is inherent in submission and capitulation.

The most difficult moment of this night of heroism occurred when the bitter news arrived.

A bullet had torn the young heart of one of the finest sons of Israel, one of the most courageous warriors of Israel, one of the most promising among the commanders of the Israel Defense Force — the magnificent Jonathan Netanyahu.

Jonathan was an exemplary commander. With the boldness of his spirit he overcame his enemies, with his wisdom, he won the hearts of his comrades. Danger did not deter him, and triumphs did not swell his heart. Of himself he demanded much, while to the army he gave the sharpness of his intellect, his competence of action and his skill in combat.

In university he studied philosophy. In the army he taught self-sacrifice. To his soldiers he gave human warmth, and in battle he imbued them with the coolness of judgement.

This young man was among those who commanded an operation that was flawless. But to our deep sorrow this operation entailed a sacrifice of incomparable pain — the first among the storming party, the first to fall. And by virtue of the one who fell, a stature bent under a heavy burden rose again to its full height. And of him, of them, one may say in the words of King David:

*How the mighty have fallen.
They were swifter than eagles,
They were stronger than lions
O Jonathan, you were slain on your heights.
I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan,
You were most dear to me.
Very pleasant have you been to me,
Your love was wonderful to me.*

— II Samuel 1

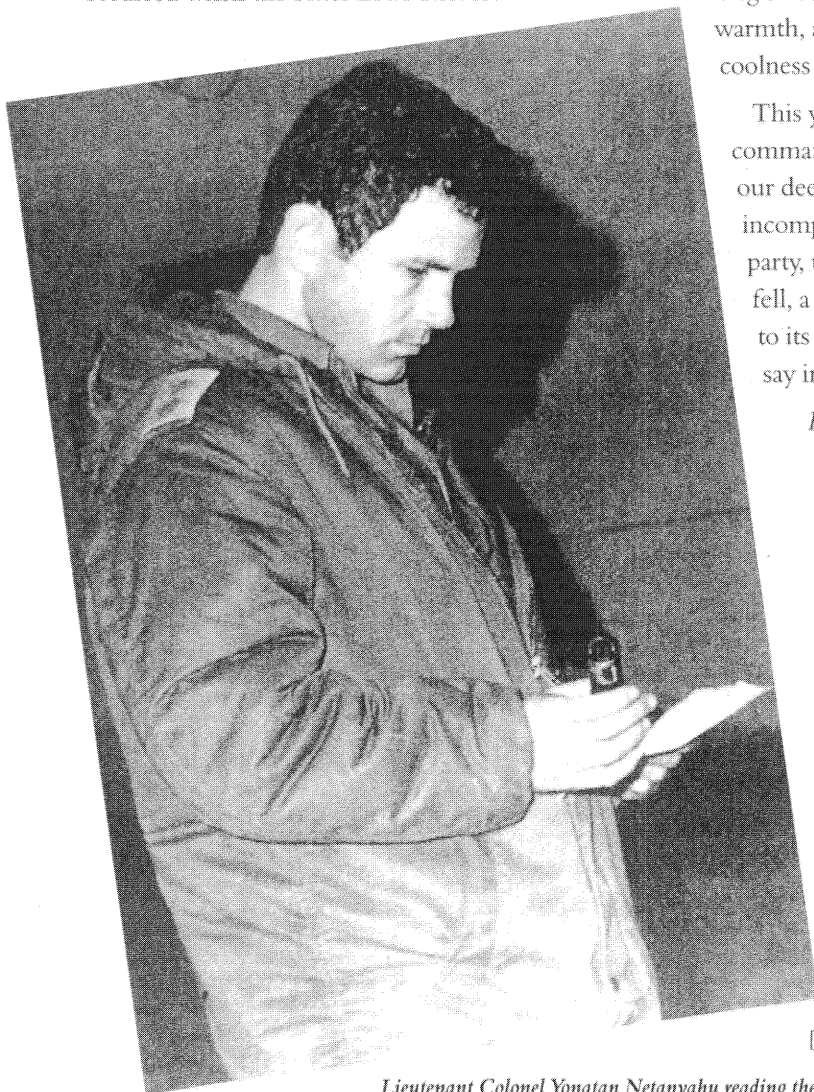
The distance in space between Entebbe and Jerusalem has all of a sudden shortened the distance in time between Jonathan the son of Saul and Jonathan the son of Benzion.

The same heroism in the man. The same lamentation in the heart of a people.

[I.N. 301-302]

Lieutenant Colonel Yonatan Netanyahu reading the names of the fallen soldiers on Israel's Memorial Day, 1976, approximately three months before he too would be killed in action, on July 4, 1976.

(Courtesy of the Netanyahu Family)



SELF-PORTRAIT OF A HERO:

Reflections on Life and Death from the Correspondence of Yoni Netanyahu

As we follow the biography of Yoni Netanyahu in his letters, we will focus on different issues. During his adolescent period he struggled to find a purpose in life, which he could not find in an American suburban high school. Then during his army years he reflected on the ambiguity of war as an occasion for uplifting human solidarity and for deep sadness. He struggled over the question of reenlistment in the army and the priority of the army over civilian life.

His brother Iddo introduced the collection of Yoni's correspondence in this way: "He was his own biographer. The letters he wrote to the members of his family, to his friends, and to the women in his life offer a compelling record of not only the turbulent events in the life of a warrior but the passionate inner soul of a noble spirit."⁴⁴

High School in America, 1963

In high school, Yoni was uprooted from his best friends, his ideologically motivated band of Israeli scouts, and exiled to a wealthy, suburban American high school. Confronted with personal loneliness, deprived of the collective mission that animated him in Jerusalem, he judged American middle class teenagers very harshly. At the same time however, he set himself the highest standards for judging his own life and death. His adolescent musings on death and despair propelled him as a young adult both into the study of philosophy at Harvard and into the elite commando unit in Israel. His willpower was undeniable, but he struggled to find a purpose worthy of his total devotion.

Dear Friends,

1963

I live outside Philadelphia. My school has about 1,500 students who don't know what they're doing there. It looks even more like the Tel Aviv Sheraton than a school (beautiful even by American standards, brand new, and it cost 6.5 million dollars to build). My house is "terribly" nice, surrounded by lawns and trees and empty, meaningless life.

The only thing people talk about is cars and girls. Life revolves around one subject — sex; I think Freud would have found very fertile soil here. Bit by bit I'm becoming convinced I'm living among apes and not human beings

The trouble with youth here is that their lives are meager in content, drifting as though in a dream or game . . . All this space that surrounds me leaves me without any air to breathe. I yearn for a place that's narrow, hot, rotten, filthy — a place that's more than 60 percent desert and that one can scarcely find on a map of the world; a place full of special problems, where not to be a party member is practically a crime.

That I'm alone (and believe me, in Israel too I was alone) does not detract from the fact that I, as an individual, as a single unit, constitute an entire world. My life will be complete not because of others, but because of myself. If I err and make mistakes, I'll start again and build anew. There's no reason why the tower I build around myself, around my person, whatever it may be, should not stand forever.

Death — that's the only thing that disturbs me. It doesn't frighten me; it arouses my curiosity. It is a puzzle that I, like many others, have tried to solve without success. I do not fear it because I attribute little value to a life without a purpose. And if I should have to sacrifice my life to attain its goal, I'll do so willingly.

Generally, my mood hasn't changed. I can't stand America and I'm dying to return.

Miss you,

Yoni⁴⁵

44. *Self-Portrait of a Hero*, ix



Yoni marching with his soldiers in Jerusalem.
(Courtesy of the Netanyahu Family)

Dear Friend,

1963

You are almost sixteen. Do you realize you've lived nearly a quarter of your life? An insect, which lives only a few days, probably feels that its life span is enormous. Perhaps that's why we believe that we still have an eternity ahead of us. But man does not live forever, and he should put the days of his life to the best possible use. He should try to live life to its fullest. How to do this I can't tell you.

"There is no limit to human understanding." I live in this moment; I die in another. Is there any difference between the two? Are they not one and the same? There are times it's better to die than to live, and sometimes it is better not to feel than to suffer. There are times it is also good to feel that there's a purpose to your actions, that you're not helpless but strong, that you are great and mighty. Sometimes it is good to believe that man is a giant, a force before whom nothing can stand.

"Where there's a will, there's a way." Is that really so? Can man really overcome everything?

"Null and void, all is vanity" [Ecclesiastes] — concept veiled within a concept, a dense fog concealing everything, a breath on the mirror clouding the image.

I am consumed from within. I live without purpose, aching and crying out of despair.

Yoni⁴⁵

1967

Dear Father and Mother,

For me it's enough to be alive. And I don't say that ironically. When you see death face-to-face; when you know there is every chance you too may die, when you are wounded, and alone, in the midst of a scorched field, surrounded by smoke — mushrooms of smoke exploding from shells, with your arm shattered and burning with a terrible pain, when you're bleeding and want water more than anything else — then life becomes more precious and craved for than ever. You want to embrace it and go on with it, to escape from all the blood and death, to live, live, even without hands and feet, but breathing, thinking, feeling, seeing and taking in sensation.⁴⁶

We're young, and we were not born for wars alone. I intend to go on with my studies; I want to do so and I'm interested in doing so. But I can no longer see this as my main mission in life. Deep within my being I'm convinced of this. Hence the sadness I referred to earlier, the sadness of young men destined for endless war.

Yoni⁴⁷

Reflections on the Six Day War and its Aftermath

After graduating high school in America, Yoni began a life torn between Harvard and Jerusalem, between a private life and a public one, between his family and the army. This is what made him a self-conscious philosopher of his own difficult choices. In 1964 he did his regular army service and became an outstanding officer. Discharged in early 1967, he was on his way to study at Harvard when the Six Day War broke out. In the war he fought bravely and his elbow was injured so that he lost partial use of his left arm.

Though his injury should have disqualified him from further military service, Yoni hid the nature of the medical problem until he could have it partially rectified in two operations in the United States. Thus he was able to continue to serve as a combat officer.

45. Self-Portrait 6-8 46. Self-Portrait 140

47. Self-Portrait 163-164

An Enduring Sadness

Even fighting a necessary and just war of self-defense leaves a permanent deposit of sadness — “the sadness of young men destined for endless war.”

Later, Yoni explicated the origin of this sadness as it emerged from the act of killing another human being at point blank range.

Dear Friend,

1975

I remember a few years ago, there was a whole month of nothing but border crossings, and on three consecutive occasions I had encounters with Arabs (very deep inside their territory). On one of them I killed a man, for the first time at such close range, about two feet, and I emptied an entire clip of bullets into him till he stopped twitching and died. And each time, when I came home, I wouldn't tell my wife about it, just hold her tighter each time. It was hard then.

To kill at such very close range isn't like aiming a gun from a hundred yards away and pulling the trigger — that's something I had already done when I was young. I've learned since how to kill at close range too — to the point of pressing the muzzle against the flesh and pulling the trigger for a single bullet to be released and kill accurately, the body muffling the sound of the shot. It adds a whole dimension of sadness to a man's being. Not a momentary, transient sadness, but something that sinks in and is forgotten, yet it is there and it endures.

Yoni⁴⁸

1969

Dear Father and Mother,

As regards the latest incidents, I really must praise the Jewish people of Israel. The cool-headedness, the lack of hysteria, and the immediate control of every situation are really surprising. You don't find here the raging mob quality that is rather typical of hard times. This is a special people, and it's good to belong to it.

In another week I'll be twenty-three. Time flies, doesn't it? My years bear down on me with all their weight. Not as a load or a burden, but as the sum of all the long and short moments that have gone into them. On me, on us, the young men of Israel, rests the duty of keeping our country safe. This is a heavy responsibility, which matures us early. It seems that the young Israeli belongs to a special breed of men. It's hard to explain this, but it can be felt. All those wonderful pilots of ours, all our paratroops and commandos, are Israelis of my age or younger, who grew up and were educated in Israel. Men of the moshav, the kibbutz and the city, united by something that is above and beyond political outlook. What unites them produces a feeling of brotherhood, of mutual responsibility, a recognition of the value of man and his life, a strong and sincere desire for peace, a readiness to stand in the breach, and much more.

In another week I'll be twenty-three, and I do not regret what I have done and what I'm about to do. I'm convinced that what I am doing is right. I believe in myself, in my country and in my future. I also believe in my family. That's a great deal for a man of my age who has already managed to feel very young and very old.

Yoni⁴⁹

The Credo of a Wise Old/Young Man

Despite his realism about war, Yoni continued to respond to the idealism of duty. He re-enlisted whenever his country was endangered. His reflections reveal a “military hero” who is no simplistic militarist patriot but a moral citizen whose love of life did not lead him to avoid his duty, but to fulfill it. His pride in fellow soldiers never wavered, but he felt the burden of the premature wisdom of a fighter who knew life and death.

48. Self-Portrait 258. The letter written in 1975 recalls his military duty in 1968-1970.

49. Self-Portrait 179