

Sticking Points
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Yom Kippur 5786

Israel is a sticker society. Bumper stickers reflect political, cultural, or religious diversity of daily life. Twenty years ago, novelist David Grossman collected common slogans and collaborated with the hip-hop band, HaDag Nachash to compose The Sticker Song. שירת הסטיקר, encapsulated the spectrum of religious and political ideologies that made up Israel's complex social and ideological spectrum. Its music video highlighted the diversity of Israel: ultra-Orthodox, Religious Zionists, secular Jews, soldiers and Arabs.

Remarkably, many old sticker messages still resonate. Let me share a few iconic lines:

An entire generation demands peace דור שלם דורש שלום

Allow the IDF to win תנו לצה"ל לנצח

A strong nation makes peace עם חזק עושה שלום

[Either] draft everyone [or] exempt everyone [from military service]
גיוס לכולם, פטור לכולם

Avoid despair in the world אין שום ייאוש בעולם

Na Nakh Nakhman from Uman נ נח נחמן מאומ מאומן

I'm Nahman and I stutter קוראים לי נחמן ואני מגמגם

No Arabs - no terror אין ערבים אין פיגועים

The Supreme Court endangers Jews בג"ץ מסכן יהודי

Father have mercy, אבא תרחם, אבא תרחם

Bravo for peace, thanks for security
סחתין על השלום, תודה על הבטחון

We don't have children for pointless wars
אין לנו ילדים למלחמות מיותרות

One doesn't abandon one's brothers אחים לא מפקירים

Thank God I'm breathing ברוך השם אני נושם

Over the past two years, new stickers have appeared everywhere:

Together, we will be victorious יחד ננצח
and

Bring them home- now מחזירים אותם הביתה- עכשיו

As I age, mortality is no longer an abstract subject. Death is no longer a foreign country. A friend once joked, "Of course, If you don't like the arrangements, you can always go somewhere else." But, our bookings aren't always up to us.

The "sticker society" culture has become deeply personal. Families create and display stickers honouring loved ones lost to war - intimate tribute that dot the urban landscape, on bus shelters, lamp posts and entrances to bars. Here are some of them from my neighbourhood with the names of the young people memorialized on the stickers:

Leadership is not to be the best; it is to help others to be their best.
Omer Neutera

If you have to do it, do it - quietly, with precision and professionalism.
Ro'i Bet Yaakov

In the name of all Israel, I go out to battle for the existence of the Jewish people. Shma Yisrael. Yonatan Berger

Don't wait for them to ask. Simply help. Eliyahu Zimlist

If not I, then who? Daniel Peretz

Life is a long adventure, so try to have a smile
Commander Liam Hazi

Live each day as if it were your last. Yuval Peretz

I do this for Eretz Yisrael. Ro'i Davi

See the best of the light, not the darkness. Or Mizrahi

It will be good; it must be so. Segev Schwartz

Try to be content with your portion. Omri Peretz

Think about good, and it will be good. Never be alone.
Itamar ben Yehuda

Don't stop because you are tired; stop when you have been victorious.
Hillel Solomon

I am not afraid of death, I am afraid not to have lived.
Guy Carmiel

A smile brings joy, and joy gives strength to continue
Ro'i Miller

I am with you until the end of the line. Tomer Ahimas

Fly as far as you can. Amir Fisher

You can mess with yourself or do something better. It's your choice.
Dekel Suissa

If you can dream it, you can do it. Nadav Bitton

I have no other land Idan Kinan

In addition to the 1200 killed on October 7, these stickers serve as a reminder of the over 915 soldiers and 70 police who have been killed in combat. We cannot help but also note the thousands of Gazans who have been killed in this terrible war brought on by Hamas. I have no sympathy for the terrorists, but many were simply ordinary individuals, old people and babies.

The stickers speak to the cost of defending Israel and the importance of upholding the values embodied by those no longer with us.

In addition to the stickers, there are letters. My colleague and friend, Daniel Gordis, observes: "The letters are found everywhere. In their bedrooms, which their parents go through after the dreaded knock on the door with three uniformed officers outside — a sight that every Israeli both understands and fears. Or the letters are in their pocket, found after they're wounded, or killed, and their uniforms are removed by the medics, at the hospitals, or worse. Most, thankfully, are never read, because the soldiers come home. But far too often, young women and men did not come home, and [then] the letters are found."

Following the funeral and the eulogies, bereaved families often publish these soldiers' last words. Written by ordinary young people facing extraordinary uncertainty, these letters teach profound lessons for consideration on Yom Kippur, before Yizkor.

As you'd expect, they express love and gratitude to parents and siblings, and friends; sometimes apologies, and reflections about the war thrust upon them. Interestingly, many express fulfilment and even gratitude.

Sgt. Maj. (reserves) Ben Zussman, 22, of blessed memory:

“If you’re reading this note, then something happened to me. Since you know me well, I am happy and grateful for the privilege of defending our beautiful land and the Jewish people.”

Sergeant Major Yosef Gitratz, 25: “Dear Mom and Dad, I love you so much. I lived a good and interesting life, yet at the same time, I was never afraid of death. I could have chosen to hide and not come here. But that would go against everything that I believe in and value, and who I consider myself to be. I would make the same choice again and again. Please find something positive in all of this. Be with the grandchildren. Help Israel.”

From “soldier A”: “I never imagined I would have to write something like this. I kept pushing this off until I was told we’ll be entering Gaza tomorrow — and there’s a chance we won’t be back. I need you to know: though I don’t show you a lot of love and don’t spend a lot of time with you, I appreciate you so, so much. Even when I was struggling, you never gave up on me. At the end of the day, family is everything. You are my entire world. .

Think for a moment: If you are older, in good health, but aware of the challenges of aging, what would you write to your family? If you are younger, going in for serious surgery or heading out on a long trip, would you write an “in case” letter to your family? Martin Buber wrote of life lived “on the narrow ridge.” At the “narrow ridge” of life and death, these young people tapped into a profound sense of meaning, transcending the immediate challenges they faced.

Captain Y wrote: “Lots of thoughts are running around in my head, why us, why now, why there. Tension in the air, and so are dark jokes about who’ll come back and who won’t. We know what we’re going towards, and the enemy is preparing surprises for us.

Despite this, I look to the people behind me, to my left and right, and I am confident in us. To lead from the front — that is exactly what you’ve taught me to do. Thinking about ‘why us,’ the answer is very clear to me. To fight for this country, to lead this unit, it isn’t exceptional heroism - it’s the standard. And if I had to reshape my life, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

In *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters*, Emily Estafani Smith identifies four pillars of meaning: **belonging, purpose, storytelling and transcendence**. These last letters embody these pillars.

Belonging usually comes through strong relationships with friends and family. The letters also display a deep tie to the land of Israel and its people. As Joshua Berman writes: “We live in a tiny land. Here, nearly your entire family and every significant friendship you ever made, lives within a two-hour drive. Israel is a land of belonging.”

Purpose is about being other-oriented. As Soldier A wrote: “I am going into this war knowing I might not be coming back, but I believe wholeheartedly in what I am doing. We have no other country, and now it is my turn to defend it. This is the way you raised me.”

The letters celebrate life over glorifying death. Jewish tradition doesn’t pursue martyrdom; instead, certain ideals and actions are held as more important than life itself. While we wish for long, meaningful lives, we are taught to prepare to die for values greater than the self. Jewish martyrdom enables life, but doesn’t worship death.

During Musaf today, we’ll read of Rabbi Akiva. In the last moments before his brutal execution, he told his students “All my life I was uncertain about the possibility [of martyrdom]. Now, I take it upon myself with love and responsibility.”

Storytelling is the narrative we tell ourselves about our lives. Have you shared with your children or grandchildren the critical events and choices that shaped you? How do you connect the dots of your experiences?

Ben Zusman, again:

I have had the privilege of fulfilling my life’s purpose, and you can be certain that I am looking at you from above with an enormous smile. I imagine that I’ll sit next to Grandpa and we can fill each other in, on what changed from [his] war to [mine]. If you are sitting shiva, turn it into a week with friends, family and a good time. And there should be food. Meat.

Transcendence. Stepping beyond the everyday, seeing oneself as part of something vast and enduring. I’ve recently learned about First Nations and their seven-generation perspective. We phrase it as *m’dor l’dor*. For some, these values are religious, but repeatedly, the letters voice commitment to “the people” and “the country” above all else. These young soldiers feel the magnitude of their historical moment, fighting for a moral-spiritual legacy that goes back to time immemorial.

Consider Rabbi Hananya ben Tradyon, one of the ten martyrs recalled during Musaf, wrapped in a sefer Torah while being burned alive. He told his students that he saw the parchment burning, but the letters ascending to heaven. His fate was now entwined with the Torah, linking his death to a narrative far greater than himself.

The letters display remarkable transcendence, recognizing their deaths as small notes in an eternal story.

Strikingly, not one letter, even those written by religious soldiers, mentions the afterlife. Judaism envisions a subtle connection between worlds; we build ourselves here and hope our spiritual lives will live on. Moshe Tarragon observes that afterlife is seen less as a reward and more as a result of how we live. Even as they face the next world, the soldiers' words are firmly grounded in the here and now. "And there should be food. Meat."

The stickers and these sacred letters are about life, historical memory, and selflessness. They remind us to live with belonging, purpose, storytelling and transcendence.

You don't have to face death in combat to live by these ideals. George Raveling lost his father to a heart attack at age nine, and his mother was institutionalized soon after, yet he became a well-regarded basketball coach, also known for preserving the handwritten copy of Dr King's "I have a dream" speech and for bringing Michael Jordan to Nike. Above all, he was known for empathy and service. Before his death this summer, Coach Raveling said.

I want to be remembered as someone who uplifted others, who fought for equality and opportunity, who never stopped learning and growing. I want future generations to look at my life and see that it's possible to overcome adversity, to reinvent yourself at any age, to make a difference no matter where you come from.

In the end, we won't be remembered for the years we lived, but for what we did with those years. We won't be measured by metrics like wins and losses or successes and failures, but by questions like: Were you kind? Were you a person of integrity? Someone who told the truth? Someone others could trust? Did you leave this place a little better than you found it?

Live with purpose, with excitement, hope, and the understanding that every day is an opportunity to study, learn, listen, love, and serve. Make it count. Make it matter. Make a difference. That is what you were made for.

One doesn't have to face death to choose a meaningful life path. The essence of *teshuvah* is not just apologizing for failings, but embracing a constant, active decision to orient ourselves toward belonging, purpose, storytelling, and transcendence.

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