

Preface

I came across this book randomly on Twitter. It was on a list someone had compiled of the ten best books on the Yom Kippur War. I got a copy from a library and read it within an hour or so. The words gave me no rest and I almost immediately decided to translate it.

The Yom Kippur War (a.k.a. The October War) holds a special place in Israeli history. One of the main threads in the tapestry that is Israel is fear, fear of extinction, of annihilation. It started with the Holocaust, when the Nazis tried to eradicate all Jews and continued with the proclamations of Arab leaders following the founding of Israel in 1948. Promises to destroy Israel and throw all the Jews into the sea were common and repetitive.

In 1967 tensions suddenly rose in the Middle East. Egypt readied itself for war. Nasser, the dictator of Egypt, again promised to throw all Jews into the sea. In Israel the mood was of despair. Many weren't sure Israel would survive the coming conflict.

And yet Israel not only survived it but smashed the armies of Syria, Jordan and Egypt in a war which lasted only six days. The world, including the belligerents, was astonished. Anguish was replaced by elation. The armed forces of Israel seemed invincible, the victorious commanders godlike. The government, the people and the military now plunged into insouciance, unable to imagine a scenario in which Israel could be challenged ever again.

On the 6th of October 1973 Israel paid the price for that change of heart. With total surprise the armies of Egypt and Syria invaded. In three weeks of desperate fighting Israel managed to beat back the invaders, but only just. The story of Israel had almost been cut short. Thousands of Israelis were dead, many more came back scarred for life. The myth of Israeli invincibility was slaughtered and the entire nation now suffered a form of post traumatic stress disorder. The absolute trust that Israeli leadership enjoyed was permanently shattered.

Since then Israelis have been reliving that moment every year, and especially on Yom Kippur itself.

This book is not a history book. It doesn't follow the course of the battles, nor the debates in the war rooms. It's a very personal journey of a single soldier during two weeks of that war. The author weaves simple words and powerful imagery to transport the reader into the horrific reality of his experiences.

The text doesn't fit neatly into a specific genre. Everything about it is concise and condensed. It focuses very precisely on the author's own experiences, disregarding the political and military background. When the war breaks, the author is taken south to the front line, and is gradually exposed to the full reality of war. From the initial uneasiness, to the first sights of wounded and dying and then finally to the relentless assault on his body and mind which culminates in disaster.

October, A War Diary

Like the country, the author survived the war, but relives it every day. After his discharge from the military he studied art in Israel and the UK and then became a photographer, painter and writer.

October, A War Diary

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Visit the translator's website at <https://www.jonyomtov.me>

War Diary, 5th October

They put us on a truck
thirty scared guys traveling in the darkness to Zikkim
They told us we were going to battalion
No one asked what's a battalion
We arrived at 6 am
A whispered rumor said that in Zikkim
they're building the cylinder bridge
Cylinder bridge sounded real secret
I didn't care at all
I was just glad that no one was bothering me
and asking me soldier - how's your weapon?
12 o'clock
I heard an explosion from the sea
No one understood what it was
To this day no one knows what the blast was
The day passed in a kind of uneasy boredom
They said wait till tomorrow, tomorrow we're going down
to Sinai
I slept in a sleeping bag on the sand

War Diary, 6th October

We're going, get up
and he shouted out exactly how many minutes we had
to get inside the bus, and how many minutes
for breakfast, and don't forget anything

October, A War Diary

In the bus the radio screamed war

I sat in the back seat right next to the window

and the announcer said IDF forces

and those two words stuck in my head and wouldn't let go

IDF forces, IDF forces. To me it sounded like a cult

mystical

We passed Beer Sheba, and then Eilat

It was my first time in that city

The bus stopped for a few minutes so we could take a piss, and we continued

into the desert

I thought, there's people in New York who feel small

because of the huge buildings, I felt small because of the desert

Too much scenery, and mountains, and the others started telling stories

about the trip to Eilat they'd made before getting drafted

Some sang with the radio, and shut up with the news

A bus full of soldiers going to war

I didn't understand it at all.

Get off, fall in, kitbag on your back, weapons ready for inspection

And they counted out the time

a few minutes to set up camp, and a few more seconds

to get the gear off our backs

to get out our shovels and wait in ranks for our CO's orders

At 7 pm a jet flew by, low

At 7 pm and a few minutes, it dropped some bombs

At 11 pm it came back and did the same

The blast hit some soldiers, the metal hit others

October, A War Diary

War Diary, 7th October

I woke up feeling like hell –

for the longest time I felt like I was dead but I wasn't

Here's the blood so there should be a pulse here

I can feel the pulse but it's not my hand I'm sure

Where's my wrist? Throbbing, here and here

It doesn't matter where the pulse is, who even taught me
to find it

I realized my eyes were closed

A light broke in when I opened them

A poet might have said I saw Rembrandt painting light

Then they hurried everyone along, get up

and watch out for the Sudanese

They said the Sudanese are tall and strong and violent and dangerous

and they're all over the sand ahead and behind and below

and above

For the first time in my life I saw a Sudanese man

Dead

The hands holding the head trying to stop the bleeding

There were no legs

There used to be, but when I saw him there weren't